

**Marcus Aurelius:**  
**Living philosophy and the business of governing an Empire**

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# ENGLISH ABSTRACT

This study attempts to understand the actions of one specific leader, the philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius, who ruled the Roman Empire during the second century CE. Consideration is given to how his decisions and actions were influenced, either consciously or subconsciously by both internal and external influences throughout his reign. In this, the study explores examples from his life and illustrates how both Stoic and Roman ethics may have influenced his leadership decisions, focussed on three specific spheres, namely actions around his familial and friendship relationships with focus on his relationship with his adoptive father, Antoninus Pius, his wife, Faustina, his brother, Lucius Verus and his son Commodus; slavery; and the persecution of Christians.

Central to the study are two principles which are explored throughout the study in terms of how they relate to the actions of Marcus Aurelius, namely: the principle of philosophy of action and the principle of practical ethics.

Chapter one considers introductory issues and the rationale for the study. In chapter two the study examines the formation of the man, Marcus Aurelius, his character, his education and possible influencers that could have contributed to his actions. The chapter provides an historical overview of Marcus Aurelius' education from childhood through to emperorship and considers his presumed move away from rhetoric to philosophy. Roman and Stoic thought is considered in order to provide a more rounded exploration of the factors that shaped Marcus Aurelius' decisions and an attempt is also made to understand wider thought in the second century CE in order to provide context within which to view Marcus Aurelius' thought and actions.

In chapter three the purpose of his *Meditations* is explored in order to provide a view on Marcus Aurelius' character and philosophical development as it emerges from the themes utilised in the *Meditations* and highlighting his philosophy of actions.

The final chapter considers Marcus Aurelius' career in respect of the three focus areas. The extent to which his education and philosophical convictions influenced his decisions in these spheres is explored. The chapter also explores certain contradictions found in the image of Marcus Aurelius in order to arrive at a re-evaluation of his political career.

# AFRIKAANSE OPSOMMING

Hierdie studie poog om die optrede van 'n spesifieke leier, die filosoof-keiser Marcus Aurelius, wat gedurende die tweede eeu na Christus die Romeinse reik regeer het te verstaan. Oorweging word gegee aan hoe sy besluite en optrede deur beide interne en eksterne faktore, bewustelik of onbewustelik beïnvloed is gedurende sy keiserskap. Hiervolgens ondersoek die studie voorbeelde uit sy lewe en illustreer hoe beide Stoïese en Romeinse etiek sy leierskapsbesluite beïnvloed het. Hierdie is dan gefokus op drie spesifieke sfere, naamlik Marcus Aurelius se aksies rondom sy familie- en vriendskap verhoudinge met betrekking tot sy verhoudings met sy aangenome vader, Antoninus Pius, sy vrou, Faustina, sy broer Lucius Verus en sy seun Commodus; slawerny; en die vervolging van Christene. Sentraal tot die studie is twee beginsels wat deur die studie ondersoek word in terme van hoe dit verband hou met die optrede van Marcus Aurelius, naamlik: die beginsel van aksie-filosofie en die beginsel van praktiese etiek.

Hoofstuk een behandel inleidende kwessies en die rasionaal vir die studie. In hoofstuk twee van die studie word die vorming van die man, Marcus Aurelius, sy karakter, sy opvoeding asook moontlike invloede wat tot sy optrede kon bydra ondersoek. Die hoofstuk bied 'n historiese oorsig van Marcus Aurelius se opvoeding vanaf kinderjare tot keiserskap en bespreek sy vermeende skuif van retoriek na filosofie. Romeinse en Stoïese gedagtes word ook in oorweging gebring om sodoende 'n agtergrond te verskaf vir die besluite wat Marcus Aurelius gemaak het. 'n Posing word ook aangewend om algemene denkpatrone van die tweede eeu te verstaan om sodoende konteks te verskaf waarbinne Marcus Aurelius se gedagtes en optredes oorweeg kan word.

In hoofstuk drie van die studie word die doel van die *Meditasies* ondersoek en 'n geheelbeeld van Marcus Aurelius se karakter en eie filosofie, soos dit blyk uit die temas wat in die *Meditasies* gebruik word, te beklemtoon.

Die laaste hoofstuk ondersoek Marcus Aurelius se loopbaan met 'n fokus op drie sfere van aksie: sy hantering van kwessies rondom sy persoonlike verhoudinge, slawerny en die vervolging van Christene en die politieke implikasies daarvan. Die mate waartoe sy opvoeding en filosofiese voorkeure sy aksies in hierdie drie sfere beïnvloed het word ook ondersoek. Die hoofstuk skenk ook aandag aan 'n aantal teenstrydighede in die beeld van Marcus Aurelius en probeer sy politieke loopbaan herevalueer.

# CONTENTS

<b>ENGLISH ABSTRACT</b>	ii
<b>AFRIKAANSE OPSOMMING</b>	iii
<b>CONTENTS</b>	iv
<b>PREFACE</b>	vi

## CHAPTER 1:

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	1
<i>1.1 The Aim of the Study</i>	1
<i>1.2 Sources on Marcus Aurelius</i>	6

## CHAPTER 2:

<b>MARCUS AURELIUS IN CONTEXT</b>	10
<i>2.1 The Formation of the Man</i>	10
<i>2.1.1 Youth</i>	12
<i>2.1.2 Further Education</i>	16
<i>2.2 Philosophy and Roman Ethos</i>	20
<i>2.2.1 Marcus Aurelius' Conversion to Philosophy</i>	20
<i>2.2.2 Marcus Aurelius the Stoic</i>	26
<i>2.2.3 Stoic Philosophy in Rome</i>	30
<i>2.2.4 Roman and Stoic Thought</i>	33

## CHAPTER 3:

<b>THE <i>MEDITATIONS</i></b>	44
<i>3.1 Introduction</i>	44
<i>3.2 Personal Diary or Moral Treatise?</i>	45
<i>3.3 A Window on Marcus Aurelius' Inner World</i>	52

## **CHAPTER 4:**

<b>MARCUS AURELIUS IN ACTION AS THE GOOD PHILOSOPHER-EMPEROR</b>	<b>62</b>
<i>4.1 Introduction</i>	62
<i>4.2 Marcus Aurelius and his Personal Relationships</i>	63
<i>4.2.1 Antoninus Pius</i>	65
<i>4.2.2 Lucius Verus</i>	73
<i>4.2.3 Commodus</i>	77
<i>4.2.4 Faustina</i>	79
<i>4.2.5 Some Concluding Remarks</i>	81
<i>4.3 Marcus Aurelius and Slavery</i>	83
<i>4.4 Marcus Aurelius and the Persecution of the Christians</i>	89
<i>4.5 Some Concluding Remarks</i>	99
 <b>CONCLUSION</b>	 99
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	102

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The inspiration for this thesis originated from my love of Rome and my lifelong interest in History. Over the past 10 years I have had the opportunity to travel and Europe has been top of my list during these travels. With each trip I discover new facts and interests about the Ancient world.

In 2014 I saw an advertisement in a Sunday Newspaper for a PGD in Ancient Cultures at the University of Stellenbosch and although I am a Communications Manager by trade, my love of history drove me to enter the programme. The programme served to further increase my love of history and awakened a curiosity about all things ancient. Therefore, when I received the opportunity to complete my Masters by writing this thesis, my natural inclination was to combine the communication of leadership and my interest in history. One of my first thoughts was around Marcus Aurelius and the *Meditations*, which was touched on in a lecture by Professor Annemaré Kotzé. I found it a challenge to explore the actions of a leader and within this process I again realised how important decision-making is as a leadership skill and as a vital competency for any leader. It also accentuated the difference in being a world-leader who had to address a social need, as compared to a leader that formulates strategies on an every-day basis in an organisation.

I would not have been able to have completed this course without the support of Professor Kotzé, who guided me in my proposal and taught me how to change my writing from a “Public Relations” style to that of an academic writer. Although we did the mentoring via telephone, Professor Kotzé could successfully guide me in my embryonic thoughts to a different plateau than original planned, but one that has enriched me beyond any measure. She guided my incomplete thoughts into coherent paragraphs and helped me wade through the vast number of works already published on Marcus Aurelius and Stoicism.

My enthusiasm for all things Marcus took on a different meaning in my visits to Greece and Rome, where I had an entire tour group assisting me in finding the real Marcus Aurelius. My travels certainly helped give me a different perspective in the course of this process. Back home, I discovered the writings of the renowned scholars that I quote throughout the work. Without their research I would not have been able to even have contemplated a thesis which involved both Philosophy and Religion. Their work made mine so much easier.

I also have to reserve a special thank you to Marcus Aurelius himself, who helped me grow as an individual through his wise words in the *Meditations*.

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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. The aim of the study

History has seen the rise and fall of many famous leaders and their choices and actions have fostered much debate amongst scholars. These choices and actions are intrinsically linked to the concepts of “philosophy of action” and “practical ethics”, two concepts that are central to this study.

The principle of philosophy of action<sup>1</sup>, as defined by Wilson & Shpall (2016:1) speaks to the conceptual link between a true action versus an intention, while the principle of practical ethics, according to Thompson (2007:1), speaks to the link between theory and practice. If one therefore considers action versus intention and theory versus practice, one could argue that from a logical perspective, these would often be seen to be in conflict (see Thompson 2007:1).

If actions are considered within a framework of leadership, one can reasonably argue that a leader’s actions ultimately determine their success while also affecting the lives of their subjects. In addition, one could argue that a leader’s choice around which actions to take is complicated by the assumption that most humans are in some way influenced by their own internal ethos as well as the external ethos of the period in which they live. This can possibly result in the conflict of principles, as referred to by Thompson, above. Logically, both these internal and external influences lead to the shaping of a leader’s frame of reference, which in turn influences their leadership and determines the outcome of their career.

I am interested in these conflicting principles and the extent to which a leader is influenced by either when taking action. In addition, I am interested in the political play that a leader is necessitated to apply within their decision-making in order to survive politically especially during socio-political conflicts. This study concentrates on attempting to understand the choices one specific leader, the emperor Marcus Aurelius made, consciously or subconsciously, and to understand the extent to which his own frame of reference was influenced. The study explores the life of this philosopher-emperor and his views with regards to philosophy and Roman ethos, taking into account his own

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<sup>1</sup> “An agent performs an activity that is directed at a goal, and commonly it is a goal the agent has adopted on the basis of an overall practical assessment of his options and opportunities” (Wilson & Shpall 2016:2).

character development. Ultimately the study attempts to consider how Marcus Aurelius' actions can be evaluated in the light of his context, especially with regards to his (Stoic) philosophy.

The scope of the study is restricted, in that it is neither about Stoicism in general nor about Roman ethics in general. It is also not the purpose of this study to investigate ethical theory in any depth, but rather to examine examples from the life of Marcus Aurelius, illustrating how both Stoic and Roman ethics may have influenced his leadership decisions. The study focuses only on three specific spheres of Marcus Aurelius' decision-making, namely decisions concerning: 1) Marcus Aurelius' actions in the sphere of his personal relationships, with emphasis on his relationships with his adoptive father, Antoninus Pius, his wife, Faustina, his brother Lucius Verus and his son Commodus;<sup>2</sup> 2) slavery; and 3) the persecution of the Christians.

The approach of the study is three-fold. Firstly, in order to portray issues in concrete terms, some preliminary research is conducted on Marcus Aurelius, Stoicism and Roman ethics within the Antonine period. The study attempts to correlate the historically documented actions of Marcus Aurelius with his philosophical ideals. Secondly, a literary-textual investigation of the *Meditations* and of a selection of letters from Marcus Aurelius' correspondence with his tutor Fronto, as well as of historiographical works from the period is made in order to find pointers to Marcus Aurelius' thought, character and development as a man. In the third place, an attempt is made to evaluate the extent to which Marcus Aurelius' actions may be said to be in harmony with his thoughts expressed in his *Meditations* and correspondence, and the extent to which his decisions may have been a product of the traditional ethos of the period.

Given the centrality of the *Meditations* as a source which could provide insight into Marcus Aurelius' frame of mind and based on logical assumptions after reviewing the *Meditations*, two theoretical principles with regards to the work were also considered. These are discussed in Chapter 3 of the study, with reference to current debates in scholarship:

- a. What was Marcus Aurelius' ultimate purpose in writing his *Meditations*? Was it to be a moral treatise, a personal diary or simply lessons learnt? Was it written for himself or in order to educate others?
- b. Are there correlations between the content of the *Meditations* and Marcus Aurelius' actions as Emperor?

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<sup>2</sup> The three focus areas are dealt with in the following order throughout the thesis, namely: socio-political decisions, measures concerning slavery and thirdly those pertaining to the persecution of the Christians.

Most scholars agree with Brunt (2013:5) who states that:

the value of the *Meditations* for the understanding of Marcus Aurelius is obviously much greater if they present his innermost thoughts, expressed with perfect candour, than if they were designed as a moral treatise for the edification of others.

This issue is kept in mind throughout the study wherever the *Meditations* is used as a window on Marcus Aurelius' thought. In scholarship there is seemingly no consensus on whether Marcus Aurelius' actions as emperor correlate with the philosophical ideals documented in the *Meditations*, but this study attempts to highlight possible correlations where supporting evidence has been found.

The life of Marcus Aurelius is chosen for the purposes of this study, as opposed to the lives of some of the more celebrated historical leaders, such as Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar or Augustus. This is due to the fact that even though as philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius seems to be more associated with Stoic philosophy than emperorship, scholars, such as McLynn (2009:xi) argue that he is an unexpected celebrity in the modern world. He has been categorised as only an influencer of thought and not a man of action and especially so when compared to other leaders. Yet, his influence endures. However this argument stating that he has been categorised only as an influencer of thought and not a man of action, crumbles when one contemplates, as illustration, Hadot's (1998:vii) argument that Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, after eighteen centuries, is still quoted as "an inexhaustible source" today, in contrast to Marcus Aurelius' own prediction in *Meditations* vii.21: "Soon, you will have forgotten everything. Soon, everybody will have forgotten you!"

One also only has to consider the number of famous influential people who throughout history have testified to Marcus Aurelius' influence in their lives to demonstrate his relevance, even in recent times. McLynn (2009:xi) claims that Bill Clinton "read and re-read" Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* during his United States Presidency. Closer to South Africa, one finds a Marcus Aurelius devotee in Cecil John Rhodes (politician and prospective empire builder). McLynn (2009:xi) states that Cecil John Rhodes carried a copy of the *Meditations* with him everywhere and had marked-up certain quotes such as:

and any man thinks he lives for pleasure and not for action 'or execution?

Or

Go to the ant, thou sluggard, consider her ways and be wise.

It is a fact that Marcus Aurelius is one of the most written about figures from antiquity and as Birley (1987:8) argues, even his face is a familiar one, portrayed through ancient imperial coinage and portrait busts to the world “for over forty years, from the clean-shaven young heir of Antoninus Pius to the war-weary, heavily bearded ruler who died at his post in his late fifties”.

Birley’s quote highlights the great dilemma in which I consider Marcus Aurelius found himself and which is highlighted within this study: a man who would rather have retreated into the life of Greek philosophy, but was honour bound by duty to fulfil his role as Roman emperor of arguably one of the ultimate Empires ever known, a man that seemingly became more world-weary and unhappy, even within his private life as time progressed, a man who struggled throughout his life to reconcile the life of a philosopher with that of a ruler and politician and a man who was possibly often disappointed by those close to him. This transition within Marcus Aurelius’ character, from happy youth to world-weary ruler, is also reflected in the three spheres under discussion in this study, namely familial relationships and friendships that influenced politics, slavery, and the persecution of Christians.

The study considers the correlation between Marcus Aurelius’ actions within three identified spheres with reference to his philosophy and the Roman ethos of the time; it also explores the possibility that Marcus Aurelius was more politically astute than at first assumed by historians. With reference to the familial and friendship sphere, Marcus Aurelius made a number of seemingly out of character decisions regarding those close to him. Scholars raise the issue of the co-reign with his brother, Lucius Verus, the first occurrence of this kind within Roman history (Birley 1987:116); Marcus Aurelius’ defence of the reputation of his adopted father, the emperor Antoninus Pius (Birley 1987:58); Marcus Aurelius’ defence of the character of his wife, Faustina especially within the context of the Avidius Cassius rebellion; and finally the choice of his son, Commodus, as heir. Commodus is generally considered a tyrant and very bad choice as successor. It was also the first time in a long period of history where an emperor did not utilise the established means of adopting a successor, but proclaimed his own son as emperor (for more detail, see McLynn 2009:108 and Birley 1987:184).

When considering Marcus Aurelius’ actions concerning slavery one may do well to start by remembering Matz’s (2002:13) statement: “Slavery was an economic fact of Roman life, and as such, seldom received the moral opprobrium which it would undoubtedly attract in the modern world”. Brunt (1998:139) and Matz (2002:13) argue that as emperor, Marcus Aurelius saw himself as potentially just, whether free or enslaved. Stoics thought of no man as a slave. To them, all people have the power of freedom, which exists naturally within. From a modern perspective, the Stoics

should have condemned slavery, but because such an argument would have been contrary to the apparent interests of property owners, they abstained.

It must be noted upfront that the issue under discussion in this study does not specifically refer to Marcus Aurelius' failure to increase protection for slaves, but rather deals with Marcus Aurelius' views on justice around slavery and freedom. Within the study the consensus that Marcus Aurelius revised a number of laws on slavery, but with a very conservative approach (see Birley 1987:137-138 and Brunt 1998:143,148) is explored. To portray the issue some of these laws are highlighted and some of the presumed injustices of the time towards slaves are reviewed.

As far as Marcus Aurelius' relations to Christians are concerned, it would be wise to keep in mind Birley's (1987:264-265) doubts about the reliability of information from the period on this point and suggests that there are three ancient extremes of opinion around Marcus Aurelius' attitude: first, the issue of Christianity preoccupied Marcus Aurelius greatly; second, he was oblivious to any issues pertaining to the persecution of Christians; and thirdly, he was a Christian at heart, without even realising it.<sup>3</sup>

The most important issues examined under the section of the persecution of Christians, are the events of the "Martyrs of Lyon (Lugdunum)" and the apologists of the period, with specific focus on Justin Martyr who received the death penalty during Marcus Aurelius' reign. Further consideration is given to the incidents of the "Thundering legion" and "The rain miracle" where Marcus Aurelius supposedly praised the Christians (McLynn 2009:290-293).

In order to display the thesis in a logical order, the thesis first explores Marcus Aurelius' development and inner thoughts as expressed through his correspondence with his tutor Fronto and his *Meditations*. Therefore, Chapter 2 starts with the formation of the man, Marcus Aurelius, and considers Roman and Stoic views of the period in order to provide context within which to view Marcus Aurelius' thoughts and actions. In Chapter 3 the purpose of the *Meditations* is examined and a view is given on Marcus Aurelius' character as it emerges from the themes utilised in the *Meditations*; the chapter also highlights Marcus' philosophy of actions. Chapter 4 concentrates completely on the historical facts around the actions of Marcus Aurelius in respect of the three focus areas, namely familial relationships and friendships, slavery and the persecution of Christians. At

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<sup>3</sup> JS Mill in his Essay on *Liberty*, as quoted by Farquharson (1968:267) states: "This man, [Marcus Aurelius] a better Christian, in all but the dogmatic sense of the word, than almost any of the ostensibly Christian sovereigns who have since reigned, persecuted Christianity. Placed at the summit of all the previous attainments of humanity, with an open unfettered intellect, and a character which led him of himself to embody in his moral writings the Christian ideal, he yet failed to see that Christianity was to be a good and not an evil to the world .... To my mind this is one of the most tragical facts in all history."

the same time it highlights factors that may have influenced Marcus Aurelius' actions and style of government and discusses contradictions found in the image of Marcus Aurelius and in the way he demonstrated these practical ethics, in order to arrive at a possible new evaluation of his political career.

Although numerous scholars have researched Marcus Aurelius, his philosophies and his *Meditations* specifically, I would suggest that this study adds to the body of work. Due to Marcus Aurelius' unique and long life, his unique views in accordance with Stoicism and his reputation as a good Emperor, he provides a respected example to be utilised for a study such as this.

In order to explore the world of Marcus Aurelius a number of primary sources, including his own *Meditations* and letters are utilised. The following section briefly discusses some issues relevant to the use of these primary sources in the thesis.

## 1.2. Sources on Marcus Aurelius

The first primary source utilised within this study for the purpose of the perspectives provided on the Antonines, Marcus Aurelius, and Roman views on slavery, Christianity and politics is the *History of Rome* by the historian Cassius Dio (c.164–c.229 CE)<sup>4</sup>. According to Birley (1987:25), Dio *HR* represents the complete history of Rome from early times (80 books), but unfortunately, has survived only in an abbreviated form. Antoninus Pius' section is lost and Marcus Aurelius' section only exists in fragments. According to Birley (1987:25), Dio's writing should be considered with caution, since, as Goodman (1997:4-5) also argues, Roman senators such as Dio, Tacitus and Paternus, often focused their writing on military campaigns and the politics of the elite rather than on economic and social developments or the discreet influence of the emperors. Another argument to keep in mind is that of Birley (1987:25) that Dio apparently "idealised Marcus Aurelius and hated Commodus", but Birley (1987:25) does believe that Dio's work provides a trustworthy chronological framework.

In the thesis I also draw on examples from Marcus Aurelius' correspondence with his tutor Fronto<sup>5</sup>, which is utilised in juxtaposition to Marcus Aurelius' autobiographical *Meditations* and which in Birley's (1987:69) opinion gives "a rare insight into the education of a future leader". According to

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<sup>4</sup> Cassius Dio's *History of Rome* is cited according to the pagination of Cary, E., 1968 and herein afterwards referred to as *Dio HR*.

<sup>5</sup> The letters between Fronto and Marcus Aurelius were rediscovered in the early nineteenth century. Historians refer to Fronto as Marcus Aurelius' rhetorical teacher and as rhetorician he is seen to be second only to Cicero. Until the letters between him and Marcus Aurelius were found, he was revered, but the letters seemingly disappointed. They contained mainly anecdotes and provided very little clarity on greater matters. What they do provide is insight into the simple family life of the Antonines (Birley 1987:25).

Hard (2011:124) Fronto's letters date to the period 139-161 CE (between Marcus Aurelius' adoption by Antoninus Pius and his succession as Emperor) and 161-167 CE (Marcus Aurelius' early years as emperor up to the date of Fronto's death). The *Meditations* presumably belong to the period 168-180 CE, during Marcus Aurelius' campaigns in Germany up to his death<sup>6</sup>. Hard argues that although the content of the letters and the *Meditations* is similar, they provide us with different perspectives of Marcus Aurelius' character. Hard (2011:125) points out that the letters showcase Marcus Aurelius' interest in improving his oratorical style and reflect his concern for his own and Fronto's families. Hadot (1998:1) suggests that the letters assist in transporting one into the age of the Antonine court, yet also provide tiny details on some of Marcus Aurelius' later studies and reading. The letters between Marcus Aurelius and Fronto are used in the literary-textual investigation of this study.

Possibly the most important source utilised for the purposes of this study is Marcus Aurelius' own *Meditations*. Birley (1987:25) points out that the work provides "an invaluable series of character-sketches of his friends and family" as well as authentic references to his main influencers. The *Meditations* also contain historical references, but in contrast to the letters mentioned above, as a whole the *Meditations* is more revealing about Marcus Aurelius' inner thoughts than his actions. The study examines the *Meditations* in more detail in Chapter 3.

The biography of Marcus Aurelius in the controversial *Historia Augusta*<sup>7</sup>, is used as historical reference. Birley (1987:25-26) argues that if one takes into account the limitations of Dio, the *Meditations* and the correspondence with Fronto, one has inevitably to rely on this source. I am aware that there are a number of scholarly debates around the historical reliability of the *HA*, but both McLynn (2009:Pf) and Goodman (1997:4-5) find the section on Marcus Aurelius reliable enough, therefore it is utilised within this study.

Eusebius' *Historia Ecclesiastica*<sup>8</sup> is utilised, mainly in the sections relating to Christianity. It is written by an historian of the early Christian period, Eusebius of Caesarea. Keresztes (1968:322) considers this work to be "practically the only ancient source" on the persecutions and cases of individual Christian martyrdom of the period. It also contains details of the anti-Christian movements of the period. Eusebius elaborates on the purpose of the work in Chapter 1 of *EH*, indicating that the work

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<sup>6</sup> Marcus Aurelius died while on campaign in 180 CE, presumably in the distant winter base of Smirmium (Johnson 2010:96).

<sup>7</sup> The *Historia Augusta* (fourth century CE) is a succession of biographies of the Roman Emperors. Birley (1987:26), argues that the later second century biographies are considered reliable and contain facts not found elsewhere. We have to consider that these sections were written by a trustworthy source, either unknown or possibly Marius Maximus, who is cited in the work. Throughout the study, the *Historia Augusta* is abbreviated *HA*, followed by the particular *vita*.

<sup>8</sup> Herein afterwards referred to as *EH*

was in essence meant as “an account of the successions of the holy Apostles, as well as of the times which have elapsed from the days of our Saviour to our own” (*EH* 1.1).

It must be noted that through the utilisation of only this source, one relies on a single individual’s subjective view of the period. It is notable that Keresztes (1968:322) mentions that “Eusebius gives only excerpts” of a specific letter, which indicates that Eusebius had utilised a certain amount of editing within his writing, which makes *EH* a particularly subjective source. Eusebius himself, in *EH* i.4 underscores that the work is subjective in nature:

But at the outset I must crave for my work the indulgence of the wise, for I confess that it is beyond my power to produce a perfect and complete history, and since I am the first to enter upon the subject, I am attempting to traverse as if it were a lonely and untrodden path.<sup>9</sup>

Herodian’s *Roman History*<sup>10</sup> which dates from the period primarily following the death of Marcus Aurelius, is used to a limited extent. Birley (1987:26) sees Herodian as of little importance and *RH* is used cautiously. It references Marcus Aurelius thirteen times and his characteristics are used in order to typecast the characteristics of an ideal ruler (*RH* i.1.4) in comparison to the dictators of the subsequent years (*RH* vii-x).

In addition to these sources, some legal sources are utilised, which Birley (1987:27) believes are more reliable than some of the historical sources. This is mainly due to the fact that according to Birley (1987:27) Roman jurisprudence peaked during the reign of Marcus Aurelius. Many of Marcus Aurelius’ legal decisions are codified and while these inform the social circumstances of the age, they also highlight a different side to Marcus Aurelius’ character. Where possible these have been used mainly by leaning on scholarly arguments of experts and in the sections on Christian persecution and slavery.

Birley (1987:27) also points out that archaeology and art history make Marcus Aurelius’ history more tangible and offer important clues for understanding the context of his actions. The archaeological sources used here, include the victory column of Marcus Aurelius in Rome, a mounted equestrian statue (also in Rome) and coins and busts which provide information to complement the biographical information from literary sources. Although Birley (1987:27) argues that inscriptions and historical reliefs, such as those on the column of Marcus Aurelius are essential for dating

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<sup>9</sup> Translated by CR Whittaker

<sup>10</sup> Herein afterwards referred to as *RH*.



purposes. He also argues that they are thought-provoking, but their details are impossible to unravel and it is impossible to extract a true narrative history from them. Birley emphasises, however that they assist us in our understanding of Marcus Aurelius' era, due to the fact that they provide us with a very realistic view of the Emperor and his army, bringing the time period to life.

Based on the assumption that Marcus Aurelius was a Stoic philosopher, I furthermore reviewed the views of scholarship on Stoicism and Roman ethics in an attempt to contextualise Marcus Aurelius' decisions within the framework of Stoic and Roman thinking. I have found debates around the three focus areas of the study to be plentiful and illuminating. In addition I have attempted to provide a broad overview of scholarly work on these issues.

The study now discusses Marcus Aurelius' upbringing and education, from his early years to his later years as emperor. It reviews influences upon his character and the section also explores Marcus Aurelius' development within philosophy. In chapter 3 the study turns to the importance of the *Meditations* as a compass that guides us towards an understanding of this philosopher-emperor.

## CHAPTER 2: MARCUS AURELIUS IN CONTEXT

A considerable amount of literature has been published on both Marcus Aurelius' documented history as well as on his *Meditations*. This chapter will consider Marcus Aurelius' education and conversion to philosophy mainly in order to construct a framework for evaluating his actions, as documented in chapter 4 of the study, pertaining to familial relationships and friendships that influenced politics, slavery and the persecution of Christians. I start with this consideration since it is necessary to understand some of what motivated Marcus Aurelius before moving on to his actual actions. It is also important to explore his approach to action-taking in order to explore his way of reasoning.

### 2.1 The formation of the man

What we know about Marcus Aurelius' character is largely based upon various interpretations of his *Meditations* which is discussed in more detail in chapter 3. It becomes important to consider Marcus Aurelius, the man and his character, through his own words in his *Meditations*, if one considers Plutarch's words in his *Life of Alexander*, as quoted by Rutherford (1989:110) below:

I am writing biography, not history, and the truth is that the most brilliant exploits often tell us nothing of the virtues or vices of the men who performed them, while on the other hand a chance remark or a joke may reveal far more of a man's character than the mere feat of winning battles in which thousands fall, or of marshalling great armies, or of laying siege to cities. (*Alex. I*, tr. I. Scott-Kilvert (adapted)).

I work on the assumption that character and frame of reference must necessarily influence the practice of any individual. An understanding of why Marcus Aurelius took specific actions with regards to his familial relationships and friendships, slavery and the persecution of Christians may be gained, if one considers the character of the man.

For this reason, the chapter focuses on Marcus Aurelius' character development from early childhood into his years as emperor. The chapter examines various influences and people who influenced Marcus Aurelius' life. I want to argue that this ultimately contributed greatly to his frame of reference and character development and provides an understanding of the historical milieu and

the scope and limitations of his power. In this, the focus falls on family, friends and tutors and Book I of the *Meditations* is utilised extensively.

An important point to note specifically for the purposes of this study and this specific chapter, is that Book I of the *Meditations* is stylistically completely different from the other Books found in the work. I agree with Farquharson (1961:89) who in turn is in line with most scholarship, that the main theme of Book I is centred around personal acknowledgements by Marcus Aurelius of the lessons he had learned from individuals whom he believed had had the most influence on his life. This reveals Marcus Aurelius' strength of character as well as his moral and intellectual training and gives us an incomparable look into his psyche as a man and as an Emperor and how he wished to represent himself to individual audiences. As Rutherford (1989:90) points out, it is quite possible to infer traits about Marcus Aurelius' own character through those that he chooses to admire in those close to him. One can conclude that it demonstrates the character traits which are important to Marcus Aurelius and which he holds in high esteem. Farquharson (1961:89) argues that the writing reflects an old Greek view that character is partly based on exercising habits and partly inherited. One sees the importance of this statement if one considers the huge influence all things Greek had on Marcus Aurelius, which is discussed further on in the study.

Rutherford (1989:90) highlights *Meditations* i.17, which he believes differs from the rest of Book I. In *Meditations* i.17, Marcus Aurelius utilises the exact same format as used in the rest of Book I, namely citing the subject prior to the lesson learnt or quality admired. In *Meditations* i.17 Marcus cites "From the gods". But Rutherford suggests that in this instance, Marcus Aurelius does not talk about lessons that the gods specifically taught him. Rutherford suggests that Marcus Aurelius, in this instance, refers more to history and experiences, which he, Marcus Aurelius, wants to thank his acquaintances for, rather than reflecting on ethical teachings from his tutors, which is the case for the rest of Book I. The contrast is visible, for example, when comparing *Meditations* i.1, as quoted by Rutherford (1989:91): "From my father Verus, honourable character and evenness of temper" with *Meditations* i.17, as quoted by Rutherford (1989:91): "From the gods .... That my body has held out so well in a life like mine; that I did not touch Benedicta or Theodotus". Another example is found in *Meditations* i.8: "From Apollonius inner freedom, and to be decisive without leaving anything to chance," as opposed to *Meditations* i.17: "From the gods ... that my children were not untalented or physically deformed". In the first examples, one sees Marcus Aurelius praising a characteristic of one close to him, where the second examples all point to an actual fact in history. At the same time the differing quotes highlight the benefits derived from gods as opposed to those derived from humans.

From these quotes, one can witness that Book I is used to confirm Marcus Aurelius' opinion of those he admired as well as to confirm some character traits he himself held and presumably admired. It is impossible however to separate Marcus Aurelius' character development from his development as emperor.

Therefore this chapter also provides insight into Marcus Aurelius' education, influences and influencers pertaining to the business of running an empire, with specific focus on his love of philosophy and his path to philosophy and also highlights the friction between rhetoric and philosophy. Why is this important? Because it features as a constant conflict within Marcus Aurelius' own life and character. This leaning towards philosophy, together with other influencers, such as the emperor Hadrian, upon his character, I would argue, ultimately led to him being described as philosopher-emperor and also played an important part in how he dealt with decisions. I don't believe he could ever truly separate the philosopher and emperor parts of his character. Although this might be a simplistic view, the study tries to create a picture of the great leader, administrator and skilled politician, alternating with a picture of the philosopher yearning for the simple life, and constantly on a quest for knowledge. From a Stoic perspective one finds in Gill (2000:603) an argument that Stoics saw the ideal state to be where a ruler is also a philosopher and where politics is reshaped to enable this. This obviously creates a different perspective of the interlinking of politics and the Stoic ideal.

The study now looks more closely into Marcus Aurelius' character development. The first two sections (2.1.1 and 2.1.2), deal with his life from birth to emperor. The aim is to provide a basic understanding of these early years and these years possibly show a more carefree Marcus Aurelius, in contrast to his later more serious character.

### **2.1.1 Youth**

According to McLynn (2009:17) Marcus Aurelius' first home was his parents' villa on the Caelian. The fact that he was born into an extremely prominent family, suggests that his birth status contributed greatly to Marcus Aurelius' tendency to emphasise class differences and his disposition to favour the wealthy in later years. McLynn (2009:13) points out that Marcus Aurelius' parents also had one other child, a daughter, named Anna Cornificia Faustina, who was two years younger than Marcus, but for the purposes of this study it is not necessary to delve into their relationship<sup>11</sup>. McLynn (2009:17) states that close to his parent's villa was his grandfather's palace, where Marcus spent

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<sup>11</sup> His sister married their cousin, Ummidius Quadratus and around this time, Marcus agreed to give his father's inheritance to his sister. At the same time he asked his mother to also bequeath her estate to his sister (Birley 1987:41).

most of his childhood. Marcus Aurelius lost his father in early childhood upon which his grandfather Annius Verus, adopted him. Marcus Aurelius recalls his father's modesty and manly character in *Meditations* i.2. He also mentions his grandfather's character fondly in *Meditations* i.1, as also mentioned above: "From my grandfather Verus: the lessons of noble character and even temper". From this we can see the great influence both these men had on his character, and as I attempt to demonstrate in the study, Marcus Aurelius also seems to have tried to uphold these exact values.

It seems that his relationship with his grandfather suffered in later years as there is also a reference to Annius' second 'marriage', highlighted by Hard (2011:8) where Marcus Aurelius remembers him less warmly in *Meditations* i.17<sup>12</sup>. I would like to suggest that this passage demonstrates Marcus Aurelius' aversion to disreputable upper class morals, as his grandfather's second 'wife' was a concubine and there are indications that Marcus was pressurised to mature sexually while staying in their house, potentially leading to this aversion that he developed later in life, which emphasises the development of his character from carefree to more cynical.

There are two prominent views around Marcus Aurelius' earlier childhood, as McLynn (2009:19-20) explains: that it was very lonely and limited, with a pre-occupied mother and no obvious parent or parent-substitute with whom to bond; the other view is that he experienced an over-bonding with the older men. There was his grandfather Annius Verus, his maternal great-grandfather or step great-grandfather Catilius Severus and the emperor Hadrian himself. Later his adoption by Antoninus Pius would simply have added a fourth older man to this collection. McLynn (2009:20) argues that Marcus Aurelius seemingly was unscarred by his dysfunctional childhood of home-schooling, without playmates and the possibility exists that his childhood could have been very serene and that he was even spoilt.

I think it is reasonable to think that the pressure of being under Hadrian's watchful eye during these early years could have added an additional burden for the younger Marcus Aurelius and must have been very stressful, especially for a child. In addition, the fact that Marcus Aurelius had spent such a great amount of time with an older generation and predominantly male, could also explain his tendency in later years towards conservatism, seriousness and an excessive obligation to his duty as emperor. This leads me to suggest strongly that Marcus Aurelius felt honour-bound throughout his life to live up to the expectations these older males and especially the emperor Hadrian had from

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<sup>12</sup> "That I was not brought up longer than I was with my grandfather's concubine and that I preserved my youthful innocence and did not play a man's part before the proper season, but even deferred it until somewhat later" (*Meditations* i.7 as quoted by Hard 2011:8).

him. At the same time, his spoilt younger self also partly shaped his identity and formed his expectations as Roman upper class male.

McLynn (2009:18) points out, based on his reading of *HA Marcus* i.10, ii.1, iv.1-2 and Dio *RH* lxix.21 that at an early age, the emperor Hadrian bestowed some unusual honours on the young Marcus Aurelius. The Roman elite of this period enjoyed pretending that their son's achievements were on merit and it was this thinking that had Hadrian bestow the equestrian class on Marcus Aurelius when he was six. The aim was for Marcus Aurelius to become a senator "by merit", upon adulthood (McLynn 2009:18).

At age seven (128 CE) Marcus Aurelius reached the stage when a Roman started his elementary education (Birley 1987:33, 35-36). His maternal great-grandfather, L. Catilius Severus started supervising Marcus Aurelius' education. He took the decision to have Marcus Aurelius home schooled, by private tutors. This was a pivotal point in Marcus Aurelius' upbringing as it possibly resulted in him having an even lonelier existence, but according to McLynn (2009:21), through home-schooling, Marcus Aurelius' grandparents ensured that he was taught to keep to the old values of simplicity and Stoicism, pointing to his tendency to keep to the old ways in many instances.

Farquharson (1961:viii) argues that Marcus Aurelius' private tutoring resulted in him receiving the best education that the period permitted and McLynn (2009:20-21) references Bonner, S.F. *Education in Ancient Rome*, Berkeley 1977, pp 32-3 and states that the trend during the Antonine period was for upper-class children to have Greek tutors. Home schooling was the trend, because of a belief which existed that schools corrupted upper-class children, due to them having contact with lower classes. At the same time it was felt that normal schooling lacked discipline, resulting in idle, self-willed and even badly behaved children. McLynn (2009:20) argues that in comparison to the Republic, parental discipline lacked within the Empire, with children being spoilt and more easily left to be brought up by slaves. McLynn (2009:20) also argues that educational standards during this period was apparently lower, which relates to the comparison between the Republican, Spartan discipline associated with Cato the Elder as opposed to a more lax approach during the time of the Empire. The study will show later that the accompanying issues of amoral behaviour and conspicuous consumption were issues that bothered Marcus Aurelius significantly. But, above all, McLynn (2009:21) argues that upper-class parents preferred accelerated education as opposed to the liberal education of rhetoric and philosophy.

Although the older men seemed to have played a dominant role in Marcus Aurelius' formal education, it is important to note that, as Birley (1987:35) states, Marcus Aurelius' mother was also influential in his life (see *Meditations* i.3). The evidence leads one to suggest that she was quite

prominent in her role as mother but more so in a supportive and loving way, as opposed to the dominant educational role that the older men played. Judging from *Meditations* i.3, Marcus Aurelius admired her greatly for her support as mother and for showing him that there is another, simpler way of living, removed from the wealthy life in the city. Marcus' letters later in life to his tutor Fronto are filled with natural and loving references to his mother. Van den Hout (1988:72-73) quotes an example from a letter from Marcus to Fronto, where he shows the natural concern of a son for his mother: "My mother is better, the gods be thanked". This comment came after an incident where Marcus' mother bumped her side into a wall.

The evidence further indicates that the older men played a dominant role in Marcus Aurelius' procession through the *cursus honorum*. For instance, McLynn (2009:18) maintains that at the age of eight, Hadrian enrolled young Marcus Aurelius into training in the Roman priestly classes, namely through the twelve priests of the Salii, one of the three top-ranking priestly colleges. The Salii worshipped Mars, the God of War, and to qualify as priest, a young man had to be a patrician, with both parents living. Thus, in Marcus Aurelius' case, Hadrian had to waive the last rule.

McLynn (2009:17) argues that during this period, possibly the most relevant and prominent role-model for Marcus Aurelius was the emperor Hadrian himself. At this point it is interesting to note that the Emperor Hadrian is never mentioned in Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*. I find Hadrian's absence peculiar from Book I specifically as do other scholars, as it indicates that Marcus Aurelius either did not appreciate the emperor's influence on him or alternatively he felt that, although Hadrian had much influence over certain events within his life, he had not been very influential on his character. However, in reviewing the history, it is clear that the emperor Hadrian played a significant part in directing the trajectory of Marcus Aurelius' life.

Nevertheless the view in *HA Marcus* i.10, ii.1, iv.1-2 and Dio *RH* lxix.21 as quoted by McLynn (2009:17-18) is that a young Marcus Aurelius would have been aware of the emperor, who took a keen interest in the boy, since Marcus Aurelius' dedication to his studies apparently made an impression on the emperor. Hadrian called him 'Verissimus' – a pun on his family name and with the Latin meaning of 'most truthful'. McLynn (2009:18) argues that some thought that the quarrelsome Hadrian was teasing Marcus Aurelius as a prude, but this might seem non-conclusive. According to Birley (1987:38), 'Verissimus' is found on coins and on an inscription of the period. From this it seems as if Hadrian must have seen a lot of Marcus Aurelius during this time, but *HA Hadrian* x.1–xiv.7, as quoted by Birley (1987:38) draws our attention to the suggestion that this could not have been true, due to Hadrian having travelled extensively at this time. I consider this as possibly yet

another reason why Marcus Aurelius omitted Hadrian from the *Meditations*: Hadrian was simply not that visible during his childhood.

According to Birley (1987:36) amongst Marcus Aurelius' first teachers, were Euphorio, a Greek and Geminus, a Latin speaker. Euphorio would have taught elementary Greek language and Geminus would have taught Latin pronunciation and elocution. The norm in Roman education of the period was for a pupil to learn both Greek and Latin language and literature after mastering the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic.

Birley (1987:36) states that a third tutor would have been Marcus Aurelius' moral and general educator, in charge of his moral- and general well-being. This tutor, although his name is unknown, is mentioned with gratitude by Marcus Aurelius in *Meditations* i.5. He was probably a slave, who encouraged the notion of austerity, "to endure hardship, and have few needs"<sup>13</sup>.

Although no other real details exist around Marcus Aurelius' earliest education, it is important to note that his earlier education set a direction, which as aristocrat, Marcus Aurelius was to follow, right up to his rule as Emperor. The following section deals with Marcus Aurelius' further education from age 12 onwards.

### 2.1.2 Further Education

This section reviews Marcus Aurelius' formal education from the age of 12 up to 25, when according to Birley (1987:94) his formal education came to an end. The section will also consider his further education in later years within the administration of government, in order to provide a holistic view of his training as Emperor.

Birley (1987:37, 40) argues that at age 12 Marcus Aurelius would have moved on to secondary education, under *grammatici* who would have taught him literature, through the art of reading out loud. Marcus Aurelius would have studied passages by classical authors, whereupon debates around matters of style would have taken place, concentrating on instilling moral or philosophical lessons. McLynn (2009:22) points out that Marcus Aurelius was known for his ability to memorise huge sections and that the art of reading aloud and reciting from memory, while being much prized in antiquity, was also a great skill of the young Marcus Aurelius. I would like to suggest that this probably stood him in good stead during his years as emperor and especially as judge, where he had to review evidence.

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<sup>13</sup> "From my tutor: not to be a supporter of the Greens and Blues at the races, nor of the Thracian or Samnite gladiators; to endure hardship, and have few needs; to work with my own hands, to mind my own business, to be slow to listen to slander" (*Meditations* i.5).



Before shifting the focus to Marcus Aurelius' philosophical education in section 2.2.1, it is important to note, as pointed out by Birley (1987:62), that in addition to philosophical tutors Marcus Aurelius always had a legal teacher, Lucius Volusius Maecianus. Birley (1987:62) also mentions Aninius Macer, Caninius Celer and the sophist Herodes Atticus who taught Marcus Aurelius Greek and Cornelius Fronto, who taught him Latin and rhetoric. McLynn (2009:21) mentions additional teachers which *HA Marcus* ii.3 refers to: Andro taught him geometry and music and there were two more Latin teachers, Trosius Aper from Pollio and Eutychius Proculus from Sicca. Lastly there is reference to Alexander of Cotiaemum as influencer in *Meditations* i.10<sup>14</sup>.

Marcus Aurelius maintained a good relationship with his tutors and had an especially strong bond with Fronto, with whom he corresponded even after being crowned Emperor (see Birley 1987:94)<sup>15</sup>. Hadot (1998:6) finds the correspondence "playful", which probably reflects the affection that existed between Marcus Aurelius and Fronto. McLynn references *Meditations* vi.30.2; ii.5.1; xi.18.18 as proof when he states that "Fronto deeply resented the snobbery and hardness of the old Roman aristocracy, and Marcus readily agreed with him that the old ruling class lacked compassion and tenderness." This is also illustrated in a letter quoted by Birley (1987:73):

I know that on everyone's birthday his friends undertake vows. But I, because I love you as I love myself, want to make today, your birthday, a good prayer for myself. I call on all the gods, therefore, who anywhere among the nations of the world offer their present and ready power to men, who give aid and show their power in dreams or mysteries or cures or oracles, wherever it may be. I call on each and every one of these gods with my vows, and I place myself, according to the nature of each vow, in the place where each god is endowed with that power may hear me the more readily ...

Fronto's response to Marcus Aurelius' letter is brief:

To my Lord. All is well with me since you wish it so for me, for there is no one who deserves more than you to have his prayers granted by the gods – or rather, when I pray for you, there is no one who better deserves the fulfilment of prayers on his behalf than you do.

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<sup>14</sup> "From Alexander the grammarian: (from Cotiaemum in Phrygia in Asia Minor expert on literature especially Homer; also taught the famous sophist Aelius Aristides) not to be over-critical; and not to interrupt and correct those who have employed a solecism" *Meditations* i.10.

<sup>15</sup> According to McLynn (2009:65) Fronto was a very wealthy man and was seen as a leader of the literary movement. He held political office under Hadrian (117-38 CE) and became consul in 143 CE under Antoninus Pius. Besides being a successful advocate, he also played an active role in the Senate and was an associate of the imperial court under Hadrian, Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius (see Rees 1961:vii; Johnson 2010:139; Hard 2011:122-123). According to Hard (2011:5) Fronto not only instructed Marcus Aurelius, but also his brother and co-emperor Lucius Verus. Fronto became a very influential figure in the life of Marcus Aurelius and he continued to advise both emperors on vocabulary and matters relating to imperial oratory until the time of his death in c.166 CE.

McLynn (2009:65) also argues that Fronto's greatest gift to Marcus Aurelius was instilling in him the importance of affection, which Fronto felt was central to humankind and something not present in the old Roman elite.

Scholars also remark on Marcus Aurelius' enjoyment of Fronto's method of teaching. Birley (1987:71-72) refers to a passage in the correspondence between Marcus Aurelius and Fronto, where Marcus Aurelius seems to act as a normal student, who has been criticised by his tutor, Fronto:

To my master. I have received two letters from you at the same time. In one of them you reprove me and show that I had written a sentence carelessly; but in the other you strove to encourage my work with praise. But I swear to you by my health, by my mother's too and by yours, that the first letter gave me the greatest of pleasure and that as I read it I exclaimed several times "How lucky I am!" Someone asked Marcus Aurelius: "Are you then so lucky, to have a teacher who will show you how to write a translation from Greek maxims more expertly, more clearly, more briefly, more elegantly?" No, that is not my reason for calling myself fortunate. Why then? It is because I learn to speak the truth (*verum dicere*) from you (Birley 19987:71).

Within the correspondence, we also find numerous examples of Fronto teaching and Marcus Aurelius learning.<sup>16</sup> These letters also serve to demonstrate Johnson's (2010:152) argument that Marcus Aurelius seemingly looks to books for his own relaxation and as an attempt at balance between his duty as emperor and his private life. Johnson argues that as Marcus Aurelius' imperial duties become more strenuous there is a common theme throughout the letters with Fronto, of Marcus Aurelius' inability to focus on anything but his duty. Johnson quotes from a letter of Marcus Aurelius to Fronto:

[I have read] a little from Sallust and from Cicero's speech, but by stealth as it were (*quasi furtim*), certainly in any case by snatches (*raptim*). So much does one care press on the next, my only relaxation all the while being to take a book in hand (*librum in manus sumere*).

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<sup>16</sup> Johnson (2010:154) quotes Van den Hout (1999:138): "I need hardly say how much I enjoyed reading those speeches of Gracchus, which, with your exceptionally wise judgement and kindly intention, you encouraged me to read .... Farewell my sweetest of masters and friendliest of friends, to whom I will be ever indebted for all the literature that I know. I am very grateful, and will understand what you offer by showing me these extracts of yours (*excerpta tua*)..." (*ad M. Caes.* iii.19). Johnson (2010:154) also quotes Van den Hout (1999:112): "I have not yet read the selection from Coelius (*Coelianum excerptum*) that you sent, nor will I read it until I have hunted down my own wits [since he is mightily distracted by a speech he must write for the senate]" (*ad M. Caes.* iii.9.3).

Later in the same letter:

Send me something to read that seems to you particularly skilful in expression (*dissertissimum*), either something of your own, or from Cato or Cicero or Sallust or Gracchus or some poet. For *I have need of relaxation*, and especially of this kind, that the reading uplifts me and relieves me *from besetting cares*; also if you have any excerpts from Lucretius or Ennius, *sonorous ones, in grand style* and if possible *with the impress of character* (*ad Antoninum imp. et invicem* iv.1, as quoted by Johnson 2010:152).

Johnson (2010:153) argues here that the quote also demonstrates “how typically intense is this elite idea of relaxation under the high empire”. Johnson elaborates on this ‘relaxation’, by stating that reading during this period included some of the heavier reading one might find in a graduates reading list today, for instance difficult poetry and very challenging oratory.

Johnson (2010:153) argues that one cannot from this infer that Marcus Aurelius only read in private, but what I want to highlight here, as Rees (1961:ix) also argues that it is in the correspondence between Marcus Aurelius and Fronto and in Marcus Aurelius’ own *Meditations* where we truly see the progression of Marcus’ character from one seemingly enjoying life in the country and being less bookish and sombre, to that of an emperor with a sense of loneliness that fills the *Meditations* with sadness; yet this loneliness is hidden underneath an air of aristocratic dignity. Rees (1961:ix) suggests that Marcus Aurelius’ bookishness and seriousness might have been due to a moralistic rather than intellectual stance and that it might have been softened had Marcus enjoyed the company of boys his own age during his youth, rather than being home-schooled. Hadot (1998:5) agrees with Rees and argues that we can clearly see Marcus Aurelius’ development from a relatively happy and carefree youth, up and until around the age of twenty to an emperor beset by the difficulties of moral and social effort. One can infer from this that Marcus Aurelius’ central focus was duty above all.

Nevertheless, as heir apparent, Marcus Aurelius also had to learn how to administer the Roman Empire. The study will touch on this part of his education under Antoninus Pius and his progression through the *cursus honorum* in chapter 4, but first one has to consider an interesting question raised by Peachin (2006:147), namely how a prospective emperor knew his duty. Besides learning from Antoninus Pius, according to Peachin, Marcus Aurelius would also have had the *Lex de imperio Vespasiani*, and similar statutes to guide him, as well as the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, left by Augustus and which were in essence a job description of sorts for later emperors. I consider that it is possible that Marcus Aurelius also utilised these sources as reference and that they may have influenced his

actions as Emperor. These works were handed down from emperor to emperor and it would have been natural for Marcus Aurelius to utilise these works to guide him in his actions.

The following section explores Marcus Aurelius' conversion to philosophy. This is important to explore for the purposes of this study, since philosophy is what makes Marcus Aurelius the philosopher-emperor and what makes him unique as leader of the Roman Empire. It is also an important part of his character and clearly influenced him greatly.

## **2.2 Philosophy and Roman Ethos**

This section deals with Marcus Aurelius' growing awareness of philosophy and his alleged move away from rhetoric, which necessitates focus on the relationship between Marcus Aurelius and two of his teachers, Fronto and Rusticus specifically. Marcus Aurelius' correspondence with Fronto and his *Meditations* provide insight into how the evolution to philosopher-emperor transpired within Marcus Aurelius and also provides one with a glimpse of how this journey took place.

### **2.2.1 Marcus Aurelius' conversion to Philosophy**

Although the image of Marcus Aurelius' life as philosopher is mainly brought alive through his own *Meditations*, his development to philosopher-emperor already started much earlier in his life, long before he wrote the *Meditations*. Close to Marcus Aurelius' fourteenth birthday, he underwent the significant rite of passage that was the donning of the *toga virilis* (Birley 1987:40). This is important, as from this point forward we see a different Marcus Aurelius emerging, one that takes life seriously and one who eventually considers it his duty to persevere as emperor.

*HA Marcus* ii.3, as quoted by Birley (1987:40) states that it was around this period that Marcus Aurelius apparently started to follow the rigid life of a philosopher. According to McLynn (2009:47) the responsibility of Marcus Aurelius' education had at this stage been taken over by his adopted father, the emperor Antoninus Pius. McLynn (2009:47) argues that although Antoninus Pius took a liberal view towards Marcus Aurelius' education, he thought training in rhetoric the most important aspect for a future Emperor to study and he did not share Marcus Aurelius' tolerance for Greek philosophers.

Scholars are divided on whether Marcus Aurelius truly denounced rhetoric completely in favour of philosophy. In my view there were a number of influencers that contributed in pushing Marcus Aurelius towards a philosophic path. Scholarship has debated this issue significantly and many of these debates are highlighted in section 2.2.1 of this study, but there is no agreement on the exact method and catalyst for Marcus Aurelius' conversion to philosophy either. What is apparent is that most scholars believe that Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* was written as a private journal and not as a

moral treatise for publication, as is further explored later in this section and in section 3.1 of the study.

In Book I of *Meditations*, I have found reference to eight mentors, who according to Marcus Aurelius had contributed to his development as an individual leaning towards philosophy. Firstly, in *Meditations* i.14 Marcus Aurelius praises Severus for several ethical behaviours and for introducing him to Thrasea, Helvidius, Cato, Dio and Brutus. He also praises Severus for his views on government matters and his reverence towards philosophy. Secondly, in *Meditations* i.15 Marcus Aurelius praises Maximus for his unwavering resolve amongst other virtues. He also praises him for his dedication and focus. Thirdly in *Meditations* i.7 Marcus Aurelius praises Rusticus whom he believes taught him self-criticism and correction of the self. Marcus acknowledges that Rusticus led him away from rhetoric and rather convinced him to know the *Discourses* of Epictetus and the path of philosophy; fourthly, in *Meditations* i.6 Marcus Aurelius praises Diognetus' focus and his disbelief of miracle-mongers. He admires Diognetus for becoming familiar with philosophy and for teaching him to yearn for a plank bed and all that formed part of Greek discipline; fifthly in *Meditations* i.8 Marcus Aurelius praises Apollonius' inner freedom and resolves to always use reason above all else. He also praises him for being both energetic and relaxed at the same time and praised his skill in communicating philosophical doctrines. In the sixth place, in *Meditations* i.9 Marcus Aurelius praises Sextus for his kind disposition, humbleness, his humanitarianism and his knack for discovering the principles of living; finally in *Meditations* i.12 he has praise for Alexander the Platonist, for never being 'too busy' and in *Meditations* i.13 Marcus Aurelius praises Catulus for his positive approach to all people.

It is also noteworthy, as McLynn (2009:47) states, that Severus, Maximus and Rusticus were employed by Antoninus Pius due to the fact that they were both specialists in their own disciplines and experts in politics and governmental administration; in addition they were of consular rank. McLynn (2009:47) goes on to point out that Herodes Atticus and Fronto were also appointed for the same reason. To me it seems that it was only Fronto who truly campaigned for Marcus Aurelius to focus exclusively on rhetoric and therefore Rutherford's (1989:85) observation that Fronto is the only rhetoric expert mentioned in *Meditations* and not in the context of his rhetorical instruction, but rather in terms of a moral lesson, is significant:

From Fronto: to have some conception of the malice, caprice, and hypocrisy that accompany absolute rule; and that, on the whole, those whom we rank as patricians are somewhat lacking in natural affection (*Meditations* i.11).

I argue that it would be natural for someone [Marcus Aurelius], who clearly is friendly with and admires another [Fronto], to highlight that which he admires most in that person. I would like to put forward that if Marcus Aurelius truly admired rhetoric, he would have highlighted it as one of the lessons he took from his good friend Fronto, suggesting to me that Marcus did not value rhetoric as much as philosophy.

Marcus Aurelius' highlighting of philosophy mentors within the *Meditations* must also be a hint of his preference for philosophy (Rutherford 1989:85). Still, I would like to suggest that philosophy may have been more of a private pursuit for Marcus Aurelius, especially the degree to which he exerted himself in this field beyond 'normal' education of his peers. I would further suggest that his philosophical opinions were not displayed publicly or in a political manner. This view would find support in the agreement by most scholars that Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, reveals that his philosophical opinions were written for himself and not as a moral treatise for publication, as is further explored in section 3.1 of the study.

There is also a suggestion of this compartmentalisation of Marcus Aurelius' life when one considers his writing style in his correspondence with Fronto (Hard 2011:124). Hard argues that the writing style in the correspondence stands in juxtaposition to Marcus Aurelius' style in the *Meditations*. While this certainly points to the different audiences he had in mind it also highlights different aspects of Marcus Aurelius' character and how he separates or compartmentalises his private, family and professional life. But this is apparently not unusual for a Stoic, as Reydam-Schils (2005:5) argues interestingly, that:

Roman Stoics are often charged with leading a double life, with lacking empathy and involvement, because they withdraw psychologically into the inner fortress constituted by the philosophical mode of existence while outwardly continuing to live like other people.

Hard (2011:124) suggests that there are strong indications that demonstrate how Marcus Aurelius continued a dynamic interest, during his rule, in rhetoric as a useful governmental tool. On the basis of Reydam-Schils and Hard's arguments I have to then agree, that this suggests an alternative narrative, in that Marcus Aurelius must have reacted favourably towards Fronto's rhetoric tutoring during 139-145 CE, but that he also felt the need for ethical support, which he obviously felt philosophy provided, as is evident in his *Meditations*.

If one considers Marcus Aurelius' actual conversion to philosophy, one of the things to keep in mind, as Birley (1987:95, 96) points out, is that it was not Rusticus but Severus who introduced Marcus Aurelius to the men of Stoic philosophy. Severus was a friend of Marcus Aurelius, married one of

Marcus' daughters and influenced Marcus Aurelius to not become a dogmatic Stoic, as can be seen from *Meditations* i.14. This suggests that Marcus Aurelius may have been quite eclectic within his philosophic views, a point the study examines more carefully in section 2.2.2.

Yet, Brunt (2013:364-365) and McLynn (2009:66) both argue that Marcus Aurelius' move from rhetoric to philosophy was a gradual process and started at the age of 12 when he was influenced by Diognetus. Hadot (1998:14) agrees, but believes, as do the majority of scholars, that the decisive influence rather came from Rusticus, through his introduction of Marcus Aurelius to the *Discourses* of Epictetus. Rutherford (1989:85) argues that one can see the start of Rusticus' influence on Marcus Aurelius in *Meditations* i.7, where Marcus Aurelius' awareness of the need to reform his character and philosophic self-discovery is most clearly illustrated. Gill (2011:vii) in turn, argues that Epictetus' *Discourses* influenced the *Meditations*. In essence one can then see that scholarship is in agreement around the issue that Marcus Aurelius would probably not have converted to philosophy without Rusticus' persuasion.

Rutherford (1989:104) believes that the need for character reform and philosophic self-discovery marks a turning point within Marcus Aurelius' life. Rutherford argues that there are hints of a Platonic concept, which involves a tutor who plays on the guilt of a pupil and instils a "consciousness of error" in him. Rutherford argues that this is reminiscent of Socrates' modus operandi, but also of Seneca and Epictetus. Rutherford also refers, as comparison to Polemo's tutelage under Xenocrates. Rutherford (1998:104) argues that in these instances, it is always the pupil who changes his goal to that of a worthier goal. He also maintains, however, that this is not the case with Marcus Aurelius. For Marcus there is no change in goal, but rather a greater focus on philosophy and for him this happens slowly, over a longer period of time than in the orthodox method where a teacher instructs and a pupil adapts his behaviour instantaneously.

Brunt (2013:364-365) argues that it is clear in various passages within the *Meditations* that Marcus Aurelius had from a young age accepted his destiny to rule, even though he had also developed the desire to become a philosopher. Brunt (1998:139) highlights Marcus Aurelius' own words in *Meditations* iii.5, where his Stoic belief in the providence of order and his own role within the hierarchy is clear, here Marcus Aurelius describes himself as: "Roman and ruler, born to protect men as the ram protects the flock and the bull the herd". He emphasises his duty as emperor and as Roman, but it also reflects the Stoic in Marcus Aurelius, if one considers the word "protects". The word not only emphasises duty, but also strongly points to the Stoic concept of the regard for humanity.

As indicated, Fronto and Rusticus were arguably two of the biggest influences on Marcus Aurelius with Rusticus representing philosophy and Fronto, rhetoric. McLynn (2009:65) argues that the difference between Rusticus and Fronto was that Rusticus emphasised simplicity of style and clarity instead of the verbal acrobatics that Fronto and rhetoric embodied.

But can one truly claim that Marcus Aurelius completely abandoned rhetoric and why is it important for the purposes of this study? Rees (1961:viii) argues that Marcus Aurelius' preference for philosophy is not unexpected. He argues that the first passage in *Meditations* i.6 makes it clear that even as a boy, Marcus Aurelius experienced a conflict of cultural ideals and that ultimately he preferred the search for truth and morality above the single goal of persuasion through rhetoric. This is important, since it clearly illustrates Marcus Aurelius' mental transformation and his unwillingness to unquestioningly accept the current ethos. Marcus Aurelius' (documented) search for truth and morality becomes the difference between him and other rulers. This difference clearly has to be taken into consideration throughout this study, since his actions could not have gone uninfluenced by his philosophy. In addition this search for truth and morality becomes a constant within his life, especially later in his life, as is clearly shown by the *Meditations*.

Another interesting fact that arises here is that Marcus Aurelius felt it necessary to document this search for truth and morality. I want to put forward that this formed part of his mental transformation and by documenting this, he felt it focussed him and possibly assisted him aiding his memory and in seeking a solution. However, the possibility also exists that he wanted to document it for others after him, possibly his son Commodus, but that can never be proved.

McLynn (2009:66) like many other scholars, argues that the ultimate break from Fronto and rhetoric came around 145-146 CE when Marcus Aurelius declared to Fronto in a letter that he had been studying Aristo and neglecting Cicero and Plautus; yet scholars are divided on this matter<sup>17</sup>. In my

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<sup>17</sup> Rutherford (1998:105) references a passage from a letter by Fronto to Marcus Aurelius: "Aristo's books just now treat me well and at the same time make me ill. When they teach me a better way, then, I need not say, they treat me well. But when they show me how far my character falls short of this better way, how all too often your pupil blushes and grows angry with himself, that twenty-five years old as I am, my soul has still drunk nothing of good doctrine and purer principles. Therefore I do penance, I am angry, I am sad, I compare myself with others, I go without food." Champlin (1974:144) argues strongly that the passage in this letter of Marcus Aurelius is misleading and that it is wrong to assume that Marcus Aurelius abandoned rhetoric for philosophy. Champlin argues that the "Aristo" in the letter is not the Stoic writer, but that Marcus Aurelius is referring here to T. Aristo, a juris consult. In other words Champlin believes that Marcus is referring to his studies in jurisprudence and not to philosophy. Rutherford (1989:106) however disagrees with Champlin and argues that Marcus writes about the topic with too much emotion for it to be applied to jurisprudence. Birley (1987:93-94) agrees with Champlin and refers to the same letter, but argues that it shows Marcus Aurelius' discontent with not only oratory, but also with jurisprudence, meaning again that Marcus clearly favoured philosophy. Birley (1987:94-95) supports his argument by pointing to yet another letter, this time from Fronto to Marcus Aurelius, which shows Fronto warning Marcus Aurelius not to dabble in philosophy and defending oratory, which he believed even philosophers such as Socrates had practiced. An example of Fronto's criticism of philosophy is found in a letter also referenced by Birley (1987:95) "then you seem to me, in the fashion of the young, tired of boring work, to have deserted the pursuit of eloquence and to have



opinion Rutherford's argument (1987:106) that the religious aspect of philosophy is another reason for Marcus Aurelius' conversion is of more interest and especially in the context of this study, since this emphasises the issue that ancient philosophy was seen as spiritual and that it was closer to a religion than is the case now. Therefore Marcus Aurelius must have viewed philosophy in a highly spiritual context. What makes this statement more notable is the fact that many scholars suggest that there are a number of similarities between Christianity as we know it today and Stoicism, a concept which is further explored in section 2.2.4. The issue of Stoicism and spirituality could potentially cast a different light on Marcus Aurelius' actions around the presumed persecution of Christians during his rule.

Finally one has to look to Reydam-Schils (2010:561) who makes a strong case for philosophical education being the most revered educational experience for the elite of this period, when Marcus Aurelius was growing up. Only in the top echelons of society was philosophy studied and only after mastering grammar and rhetoric, as is the case with Marcus Aurelius. It was a privilege to be allowed to study philosophy and, as Reydam-Schils goes on to say, there existed an unending conflict between philosophers and rhetoricians. Reydam-Schils (2010:561) points out that a philosopher like Seneca, who lived before Marcus Aurelius, used his rhetorical skills to deliver his views more clearly, thereby utilising rhetoric in order to clarify his philosophical views. Griffin (2000:532), points out that Seneca regarded *moralis pars philosophiae* as the most important section of philosophy, but that he restricted it to moral ethics.

Reydam-Schils' view is very important in the context of this thesis. It highlights the rivalry between philosophy and rhetoric, hints at the dichotomy this rivalry caused within the Empire and ultimately suggests the clever political use of rhetoric by philosophers, in their efforts to persuade. It does seem as if philosophy became Marcus Aurelius' preference above rhetoric but that the study of philosophy and his conversion happened over time, starting at an early age. The study also indicates that Marcus Aurelius' earlier studies concentrated on rhetoric, probably upon the insistence of the practical Antoninus Pius. This then is completely in correlation with Reydam-Schils' argument that Marcus Aurelius' education, similar to those of other aristocrats, after the training in rhetoric, moved on to philosophy as a very important aspect of his education. This again suggests no true

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turned aside to philosophy, in which there is no introductory section to be carefully elaborated, no account of the facts, bringing them together with concision, clarity and skill ..." by contrast, "you would read a book to your philosopher, listen in silence while your master explained it and nod to show your understanding; would hear again and again: what is the first premise? What is the second premise? and when the windows were wide open, the point that if it is day, then it is light would be laboured. Then you would go away, carefree, with nothing to think over, or to write up at night, nothing to recite to your master, nothing to say by heart, no search for words, no adorning of a single synonym, no translation from Greek to our language."

break from rhetoric, but simply a following of the existing Roman educational system of the times. The fact that Marcus, dissatisfied with arguing both sides of imaginary debates, seemingly found within philosophy his greatest intellectual interest, was possibly a co-incidence that no one could have foretold (see additional arguments from Birley 1987:94). If this was the case, it could suggest that Marcus Aurelius continued to use rhetoric throughout his career similar to the way in which Seneca did, employing it in his efforts to persuade. This would be perfectly in line with the idea that Marcus Aurelius was a very clever politician, who mastered the art of political survival as emperor. It could also suggest that in reference to Griffin (2002:532) Marcus Aurelius could similar to Seneca, have regarded *moralis pars philosophis* as an important section of philosophy.

Looking more closely at Marcus Aurelius' recognised preference for philosophy, one may hypothesise that it might later have formed the basis of his beliefs as emperor. Brunt (2013:364-365) argues, however, that due to Marcus Aurelius' role as emperor, he was not seen by the people of Rome to be close to philosophy (see *Meditations* viii.1). Yet as Brunt (2013:364) also points out, Marcus does write in *Meditations* xi.7, viii.8, x.31.2, xii.2 and ix.16 that he believes philosophy to be suited to the role of emperor and that within this role philosophy is an activity of the "rational and civic being" rather than simply an act of intellectualising.

Although the study has not yet explored Marcus Aurelius' full development within the field of philosophy it has demonstrated that he may have discovered lasting intellectual stimulation in the pursuit of philosophy. The following section explores Marcus Aurelius as Stoic. The section utilises scholarly arguments around whether he can be viewed as a true Stoic or whether he may be seen to have pursued alternative philosophies. This is an important issue within the perspective of the study as his choice of philosophy will have greatly influenced his views. Understanding his preferred school of philosophy may aid an understanding of his views around the three issues under discussion later in the study, namely his actions with regards to familial relationships and friendships that influenced politics, slavery and the persecution of Christians.

### **2.2.2 Marcus Aurelius the Stoic**

The study has discussed Marcus Aurelius' strong leaning towards philosophy and this is again illustrated in Hard (2011:xiii) and Rutherford (1989:82) who point to Marcus Aurelius' participation in philosophy by arguing that one of the most notable cultural achievements under Marcus Aurelius was his reinstatement of philosophical chairs in Athens during his reign. These philosophical chairs were formal teaching positions for each of the four main philosophical schools of the period, those of Plato, Aristotle, Epicureanism and Stoicism.

The reinstatement of the philosophical chairs and Marcus Aurelius' own *Meditations* confirm that he participated in and apparently valued philosophy, but can these confirm his preference for a specific philosophical school? I concur with a number of scholars, that if one can identify the *Meditations* as a Stoic work, one can logically assume Marcus Aurelius' preference for Stoicism. If one takes into account that Marcus Aurelius could choose from different schools of philosophy, it stands to reason that an exploration of his possible preferences may throw light on his actions, since his actions, in some way, were based on his frame of reference and his beliefs. Marcus Aurelius' own ethical concerns as depicted in the *Meditations*, is important because these ethical concerns provide important clues to his personality.

To assist in this investigation, one has to consider why Marcus Aurelius wrote the *Meditations*, as this determines to a large extent what one can deduce from the work and also demonstrates why the work is seen to be such a valuable resource. Within this section many arguments and counter-arguments of various renowned scholars are explored, although the principal discussion of the *Meditations* is postponed until chapter 3. The evidence ultimately suggests to me that the value of the *Meditations* can be found within the hints at the thought patterns within the work that provides a window to Marcus Aurelius' beliefs.

Brunt (2013:447) maintains that Marcus Aurelius held forth that a person must maintain his own moral purpose, even if the world around them held no such purpose. Brunt (2013:448) argues that Marcus Aurelius utilises the *Meditations* to remind himself of the realities which rule his day-to-day life and that Marcus Aurelius might have felt that he often lost sight of these realities during his daily routine and that by writing them into the *Meditations*, he succeeds or attempts to memorise them. Brunt (2013:448) points out that Marcus does this by utilising his creative gifts and the rhetoric he was educated in, to develop imagery which he embeds in his writing. But can the work be identified as Stoic in nature?

Hazlitt and Hazlitt (1984:1) argue that the *Meditations* is one of the only ancient Stoic works which have remained, together with writings of Seneca and Epictetus. Hazlitt and Hazlitt (1984:2-3) also point to the very different backgrounds these three men came from. Seneca was very wealthy, studied both rhetoric and philosophy and had a good reputation in legal circles. Epictetus' history, according to Hazlitt and Hazlitt (1984:4) is little known, except that he was possibly a slave in his younger days and was lame, weak and chronically poor. Marcus Aurelius' status as Emperor sets him apart from the others.

However, Goodman (1997:155) maintains that most of the philosophical literature from this period showed no philosophical innovation and that the writings of Seneca, Plutarch and Marcus Aurelius

are known more for their eclecticism than for their originality. This indicates a possibility that the *Meditations* and therefore Marcus Aurelius' philosophical views may not have been purely Stoic.

Rutherford (1989:93) argues that Marcus Aurelius shows “a sense of reserve and restraint” within the *Meditations* “which goes beyond the Stoic principle of brevity and severity of style”. Rutherford believes there are more differences to Stoic principles, namely Marcus Aurelius' intimate references to sexual experiences in *Meditations* i.17.2, i.17.7, the fact that there are no real references in the work to Marcus Aurelius' daily life and that there is no continuous narrative or references to time, place or experiences. But Rutherford (1989:93) also argues that the *Meditations* is not completely devoid of Stoic references. He sees strong Stoic influences in the lack of references to incidents of joy or pain within Marcus Aurelius' life, especially to the deaths of those close to him, such as his children. Rutherford (1989:93) points out that Stoicism dictated such apathy around personal loss, but also suggests that this reluctance to talk about such issues could simply have been due to Marcus Aurelius feeling embarrassed to speak about such personal matters. This argument assumes, of course, that the *Meditations* were meant to be more widely read. Rutherford (1989:93) suggests, that as Stoic, Marcus Aurelius could even have felt it unnecessary to dwell on the past.

Rutherford (1989:219), however returns to his argument that the *Meditations*, although Stoic, is also reminiscent of other beliefs and even religious thoughts, but points out that there is not a single passage that can be shown to prove this absolutely. Still, he identifies two aspects of Marcus Aurelius that he believes sets him apart from Stoicism: his “negative attitude to the material, physical world and his recurrent reflections on change, transience, and death”. Rutherford (1989:3) also suggests that, although Marcus Aurelius denied that he was a philosopher in *Meditations* vii.i, he was well versed in the theory of Stoic philosophy and constantly translated guidelines into practice.

While Rees (1961:xi) maintains that the *Meditations* is arguably the most well-known example of a Stoic written work within the modern world, together with the *Manual of Epictetus*, Gill (2011:xiii) emphasises that nowhere in the *Meditations* or in his other writings does Marcus Aurelius mention his affinity to Stoicism directly and that the work contains short and powerful considerations, which Marcus Aurelius uses to communicate his core beliefs and values (Gill 2011:vii). Yet, Zeno (334 – 262 BCE), the father of Stoicism, is not mentioned. Only Chrysippus (c.280-c.206 BCE), an authoritative figure in the Stoic tradition, is mentioned by name (*Meditations* vi.42 and vii.19). McLynn (2009:205) also argues that Marcus Aurelius used much of Socrates, Heraclitus, Diogenes and Epictetus in his writings and it is notable that he did not lean as much on Zeno, Chrysippus, Panaetius, Posidonius and Seneca, who were widely recognised as prominent Stoics”.

Wiedemann (1989:5) argues that the *Meditations* contain little theoretical speculation, different to other types of Stoic writing. Wiedemann also argues that Marcus Aurelius' views within the work are unoriginal and that Marcus Aurelius never really perceives the contradictions between the conventional standpoints he expresses. Rutherford (1989:2) agrees and quotes Long (1974:23-45) who wrote:

The unfortunate fact is that our evidence is best from a period when Stoicism had become an authorised doctrine rather than a developing philosophical system. What matters above all to Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius in the second century CE is moral exhortation within the framework of the Stoic universe. On details of physics, logic or theory of knowledge they have little to say.

One of the arguments that needs to be highlighted here, is that some scholars, such as Morford (2002:190) argues that Marcus Aurelius was quite involved in sophist<sup>18</sup> events, but others, such as Rutherford (1989:80-81), disagree and indicate that although the *Meditations* contain an example, typical of the Second Sophistic, where Marcus Aurelius juxtaposes Romans and Greeks, by interweaving rhetoricians, Greek professional philosophers, ex-consuls and famous writers, he was no sophist. Rutherford (1989:82-83) points to various incidents between Marcus Aurelius, Antoninus Pius and the sophists and argues that Marcus Aurelius' attendance of sophist orations can be ascribed to his duty as emperor and that in fact Marcus Aurelius held a negative view of sophists, as can be seen in *Meditations* i.7<sup>19</sup>.

Brunt (2013:448) points to a contradictory argument by Farquharson who sees Marcus Aurelius as using non-Stoic parallels, thereby giving the impression that he was truly an eclectic. But Brunt maintains that Marcus Aurelius clearly shows his adherence to the main beliefs of Stoicism and suggests that there are a number of references which show Marcus Aurelius' commitment towards more complex Stoic physical theories and a commitment to the system.

From this it is clear that there are various arguments as to the philosophical school into which the *Meditations* fall. I find most convincing the arguments that Marcus Aurelius draws mainly on Stoic

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<sup>18</sup> "In the course of the fifth century BCE the term, while retaining its original unspecific sense, came in addition to be applied specifically to a new type of intellectuals, professional educators who toured the Greek world offering instruction in a wide range of subjects, with particular emphasis on skill in public speaking and the successful conduct of life. The emergence of this new profession, which was an extension to new areas of the tradition of the itinerant rhapsode (reciter of poems, especially of Homer), was a response to various social, economic, political and cultural developments of the period" (Taylor and Lee, 2016, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/sophists/>)

<sup>19</sup> According to Bowersock (2002:161-162), while philosophers were searchers of knowledge, sophists asserted that they possessed knowledge. Marcus Aurelius' aversion to sophists was attributed to Rusticus, of whom Marcus Aurelius in *Meditations* i.7 says: "[I learnt] to gain conception of the need for correction and treatment in one's moral character and not to be diverted into sophistic zeal."

philosophy, but that his formulation is very individualistic or even eclectic, especially since many scholars thought that eclecticism was a usual occurrence during this time period.

In closing, there is at least some argument to be made that the *Meditations* is regarded as mainly a Stoic work and that Marcus Aurelius can be viewed as a Stoic philosopher. The fact that the work also features some of Marcus Aurelius' own individuality in certain instances can point to eclecticism, but it seems clear that Stoicism was the strongest influence. I want to also highlight that it could be possible that due to his humility, Marcus Aurelius perhaps felt himself not worthy of being called a Stoic philosopher. In *Meditations* i.17<sup>20</sup>, vii.67<sup>21</sup> and viii.1<sup>22</sup>, Marcus Aurelius mentions clearly that during his philosophical education he never achieved a detailed understanding of the three main Stoic divisions, namely logic, physics and ethics. I contend that it is possible that Marcus Aurelius may have felt himself intellectually inferior in matters of true Stoicism, because of this educational lapse and therefore he felt he could not claim to be a true Stoic. Although he utilised other schools of thought in certain circumstances, possibly where he felt that these provided more satisfactory explanations, there are strong indications that Stoicism was his philosophy of choice.

I also have to mention Gill's (2000:598) view, which states that Stoicism during this period could often be seen to be politically controversial. As the study has shown many philosophers, after opposing certain emperors, were affected by the expulsion of philosophers out of Rome under Nero, Vespasian and Domitian. Gill goes on to state that it is not appropriate to speak about a "Stoic opposition", but it is undeniable that Stoicism provided a "theoretical base" for persons who wanted to show their opposition to the emperors. Gill further points out that Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, if definitely Stoic in nature, raises an argument around Marcus' practise as emperor and his Stoic convictions - a subject central to this study. Gill (2000:600) points out that "the Stoic view is that political structures (like other social and interpersonal structures) can, in principle, function as vehicles for the attempt to make progress towards the life of virtue and sagehood." Along the lines of Gill's argument I would then like to argue that Marcus Aurelius considered his emperorship as a vehicle towards virtue.

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<sup>20</sup> "... there is nothing to prevent me from living according to nature straight away, although I still fall somewhat short of this by my own fault and by failing to heed the reminders and, one might almost say, the instructions of the gods" (*Meditations* i.17).

<sup>21</sup> "... and just because you have resigned any hope of excelling in dialectic and natural philosophy, do not on that account despair of becoming a free man, and one who is modest, concerned for his fellows, and obedient to God; for it is possible to become a wholly god-like man and yet be recognised by nobody" (*Meditations* vii.67).

<sup>22</sup> "... for you have made it plain to many people, including yourself, that you fall far short of philosophy..." (*Meditations* viii.1).

### 2.2.3 Stoic Philosophy in Rome

In order to put Marcus Aurelius' Stoicism in context, one has to consider how Stoicism became part of Roman philosophy. This necessitates a cursory exploration of the history of philosophy and Stoicism in Rome, as well as some explanation of Stoic belief. Both philosophy in general and Stoicism specifically, were Greek in origin. Roman philosophy only originated in the third century BCE when Greek culture infiltrated Rome through increased contact between the two nations (Morford 2002:1-2).

Morford (2002:4,28) suggests that Panaetius may have been the first to have succeeded in helping Roman leaders to accept Greek political theories as part of their own, by adjusting Stoicism so that a specifically Roman philosophy emerged. It had a strong leaning towards ethics, with emphasis on the duty of Roman leaders to their state, gods and communities.

The *Meditations* reflect morality as a big part of Marcus Aurelius' beliefs. This is not surprising since, according to Brunt (2013:281), Stoics saw only the purpose of the moral activity as valuable and not the success thereof. For them a virtuous disposition was necessary to ensure virtuous activity. In other words Stoics only saw value in how someone conducted themselves morally. Whether the act in itself then ended in a moral outcome was of less importance, almost as if knowing that your intention was morally correct was enough for the Stoic, because the execution to standards set was unattainable.

In addition Rees (1961:xv-xvi) argues that Stoicism aimed at creating resilience within a person. This only appealed to a few as the achievement of this goal was very difficult. If one considers what is represented in the *Meditations* and the continuous fighting Marcus Aurelius endured whilst on the German frontier, the natural disasters the empire suffered during his reign and also the challenges associated with dealing with the familial relationships and friendship issues highlighted in section 4.2 of the study, it seems clear that Marcus Aurelius certainly was in need of such resilience and he might in these instances have found Stoic philosophy a great help and support.

In considering the issue of Roman philosophy and Stoicism, the study has to briefly consider the prominent philosophers of the period and their philosophical beliefs. Morford (2002:5) argues that although there were Romans in the first century BCE who thought themselves to be philosophers, Cicero was the first to define and systemise *philosophia togata*. Cicero established Greek doctrine in ethics, epistemology and theology for Roman readers. He translated these into Latin and developed a philosophical vocabulary for Latin. Morford (2002:35) argues that Cicero went a step further than

Panaetius and through his rhetoric, which was based on philosophy, he made Greek doctrines comprehensible to Roman audiences.

Stoicism emerged as the most resilient philosophy amongst the Romans and in Seneca (d. 65 CE) fashioned the second greatest Latin prose author of Roman philosophy (Morford 2002:7-8). Morford (2002:9) goes on to argue that similar to Cicero, Seneca based his ability on a new Latin prose style (rhetoric and dogmatic). Unlike Cicero, Seneca was compelled to distinguish between his private and public principles. Morford (2002:7-8) points out that for centuries Seneca has been seen as the most influential Roman philosopher of all time. His focus was primarily on the ethical and his only surviving work in physics, *Naturales Quaestiones*, has never really been widely revered. It seems as if Seneca's and his contemporaries' studies were focused more on respectable survival under an immoral regime, led by an emperor who had a random power over their lives. But most of these philosophers did not survive; Lucan, Thrasyllus were executed and Seneca himself committed enforced suicide, all on political grounds, under Nero. However, their philosophy provided a dialogue of political opposition and the principles on which to persevere.

Griffin (2002:535) points out that Seneca never wrote a complete work around the three branches of philosophy and references Quintilian (*Inst.* X.1.129) and states that Seneca rather explored certain topics in great detail.

After Seneca's death in 65 CE Morford (2002:10) argues that more change and turbulence came to intellectuals and philosophers in the Roman Empire. The Flavian emperors also silenced philosophers and the period saw the rise of the orators of the Second Sophistic. Morford (2002:10) further argues that Epictetus' importance in Roman tradition is clear, from the reverence with which Marcus Aurelius quotes him.<sup>23</sup>

If one considers Brunt's arguments (2013:276) one sees that Stoics seemed to have been both supporters and opponents of the Roman regime. Brunt (2013:275) mentions that during the second century CE, there was a widespread exchange of Stoic ideas amongst the Roman elite. Brunt (2013:275) goes on to argue that few of these Romans were true Stoics and maintains that even Seneca, who belonged to the school, copied ideas from other philosophies.

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<sup>23</sup> After Marcus Aurelius, came Galen, Marcus' contemporary and a physician; another contemporary, Sextus Empiricus, is almost the single source of the Pyrrhonian scepticism. Later in the fourth century CE, Augustine (354-430 CE), the Christian bishop and orator, developed the most extended system of philosophy in Latin prose. Almost a century after Augustine, the last of the Roman philosophers, Boethius, produced his *Consolation of Philosophy*, as he awaited his death sentence carried out after Augustine, the last of the Roman philosophers, Boethius, produced his *Consolation of Philosophy*, as he awaited his death sentence carried out in 524 CE. This work ends almost seven centuries of Roman philosophy (Morford 2002:11-12).



But Brunt (2013:2) also argues that if ultimately one is concerned with the “practical influence of Stoicism”, it could be said that it greatly “affected a larger number of men, or at least one, namely Marcus Aurelius, who could give effect to its precepts”. Brunt (2013:3), points out that if one looks at the relationship between the governed and the governors of the period, the role of philosophical ideas within these relations seems important. These philosophical ideas could feasibly form the basis for decisions taken in the administration of the empire. (M. Griffin 1997a: 8, citing Cic. *Tusc.* 1.2, *fin.* 2.67) as quoted by Ahbel-Rappe (2006:525), writes that “there is considerable evidence that, to many Romans, Stoicism as a moral philosophy seemed like a rationalisation of (or a poor substitute for) Rome’s own traditional ideals”. This of course provides a different perspective on this study, suggesting an interweaving between Stoicism and the Roman ethos, which needs to be taken into account throughout the study.

Ahbel-Rappe also argues that Imperial philosophy at this stage of the Empire was decidedly Hellenic. Ahbel-Rappe (2006:530) points out that philosophy during this period and prior to this period was seen as a form of self-therapy, which guided one in eliminating character flaws. From a Stoic perspective this therapy contained a number of exercises which were to be practiced every day. I would like to suggest that one can logically infer from this that the *Meditations* could have been such a therapy. And since Ahbel-Rappe (2006:531) argues that Stoicism was designed to assist the Stoic to obtain “the mind of a sage”, one could argue that Marcus Aurelius used the *Meditations* as an exercise or process in order to attain such wisdom. Irmgard (2012:372) is in agreement and states that Marcus Aurelius aligned himself to the “tradition of meditation” by reiterating his own virtues and vices and attempting to correct himself, which according to Irmgard can be assigned to the concept of “care of the self”. In chapter 3 of the study, this is explored further.

This then concludes the short survey of Roman and Stoic philosophy. The evidence shows that there was a Roman philosophical movement and that Stoicism formed a significant part of this movement within the second century CE. Section 2.2.4 specifically explores Roman and Stoic thought around the three spheres of concern in this thesis, namely familial relationships and friendships that influenced politics, slavery and Christianity.

#### **2.2.4 Roman ethos and Stoic thought**

Prior to the exploration of Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations* in chapter 3, it is vital to consider in more detail the influences on Marcus Aurelius’ actions concerning the three areas reflected in this thesis. The study now explores the traditional ethos of the Roman Empire as well as the Stoic view on specifically familial relationships and friendships, slavery and Christian religion during the time prior to and during the reign of Marcus Aurelius. This perspective is important since Hadot (1998:ix)

warns that in order to view or judge Marcus Aurelius' actions one needs a perspective of ancient belief systems, so as not to end-up viewing his actions through a modern framework. Hadot (1998:ix) argues that ancient beliefs assume a pre-existing canvas and can only be understood, once the canvas is understood. Hadot (1998:3) then maintains that at the same time it is only through this pre-existing canvas that one can gain insight into where to position Marcus Aurelius' personality and actions. The following is an attempt to understand this pre-existing canvas and in considering the era of Marcus Aurelius, one also has to consider events that preceded but influenced his reign, in order to obtain a picture of the milieu.

The purpose of this section on Marcus Aurelius' familial relationships and friendship actions is not to determine the state of mind of the Roman people during this time, but rather to focus on how one might become an emperor and how the Romans expected an emperor to rule. Marcus Aurelius was born during the reign of the emperor Hadrian when Rome was almost celebrating its 900<sup>th</sup> anniversary (McLynn 2009:2). Marcus Aurelius, who would carry the official title *imperator Caesar Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus*, was to be the sixteenth ruler of the Roman Empire. Prior to him, Nerva (96–98 CE) and then the Spanish Emperors, Trajan (98–117 CE) and Hadrian (117–138 CE) ruled. Antoninus Pius (138–161 CE) initiated the Antonine era, which included Marcus Aurelius (161–180 CE) and concluded with the reign of his son Commodus (180–192 CE) (Birley 1987:14). As Birley (1987:11) argues, the five (so-called) good emperors, dating from Nerva to Marcus Aurelius, were all very different in character and training but had one thing in common: they were all adopted. Therefore the subject of adoption and Marcus Aurelius' actions around adoption are pertinent to this study and the tradition of adoption is discussed later in the study, with a focus on divergences in this regard during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, namely the adoption of both Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus by Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius' decision to appoint his son Commodus as his successor instead of adopting a worthy successor.

Grant (1996:1) argues that the importance of the Antonines is great and that they played a distinct part in the development of the Roman Empire. Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius and Commodus controlled "this huge machine" for over half a century and the second century CE turned out to be possibly one of the most testing periods for the Empire. Grant (1996:4) argues that the Antonines represented an age of transition, where at the start of the period the Roman Empire was at its height, but at the end, with the reign of Commodus (180-192 CE), it had started experiencing the first signs of collapse. The troubled times brought about enormous social changes, heralding a turning point and a new era. During this era a shift from old paganism, to at the end, a new sort of paganism occurred and finally the age of Christianity dawned.

Gill (2011:viii) agrees with Grant, but argues that, although there were many upheavals during Marcus Aurelius' reign, it was remembered as a reign of good administration, during and after the time period, especially when contrasted with Commodus' reign. Hard (2011:viii) points out that Marcus Aurelius' rule was also typified by good relations between himself, his co-Emperor Lucius Verus and the Senate. But, with an Empire consistently under military threat, Marcus Aurelius had no option but to devote most of his time to counteract those threats, in an effort to keep the Empire secured. Hadot (1998:3), Ferdinand Lot's (Lot, F. *La Fin du monde antique et le debut du Moyen Age*. (Paris, 1951), pp. 198-199) argument, also points out that the emperors of the second to fourth centuries CE were mainly obliged to defend the Roman Empire, moving from the Danube to the Rhine and to Brittany in an effort to protect it. They dealt with numerous natural disasters, their lives constantly at risk, but nonetheless "they abandoned themselves fearlessly to their tragic destiny as supermen" (Hadot 1998:3). In this, I put forward that Marcus Aurelius was no different, as he took up his duty to secure the Empire, seemingly without a thought to the fact that he had not been specifically trained in military matters.

One may infer from this that Marcus Aurelius not only had to deal with keeping the Empire secured, but he also had to deal with an ever changing socio-political and socio-economic landscape. Marcus had to secure the social welfare of his people, but also had to successfully negotiate the many socio-political obstacles, as is surely the case for any leader.

In order to provide greater perspective on the socio-political milieu, it is imperative to remember that during the sixth century BCE, Rome had transformed from a monarchy to a Republic, ruled by the Senate. Rome expanded militarily, finally conquering the entire western Mediterranean and in the year 43 CE, Britain (McLynn 2009:2). Mennen (2011:22) argues that during the Principate, Roman power shifted from its geographical centre to include men from the East in the Senate. Even emperors did not necessarily come from Roman patrician birth. As Birley (1987:16) points out, Trajan for instance was initially a provincial and only became a patrician due to Vespasian's recognition of his father's loyalty. Mennen (2011:22) maintains that the Empire during the first two centuries only appointed senatorial *principes*. However toward the end of the second century, men from equestrian rank, such as Pertinax were amongst the imperial candidates.

Birley (1987:23) argues that the Antonine era is reminiscent of the eighteenth century. The upper-class who remembered the struggles of the previous century now had solidified their wealth and wanted to relax and enjoy both their wealth and status. For them, an emperor was necessary but he had to preserve social distinctions and recognise the worth of the Senate, which Hard (2011:viii) suggests Marcus Aurelius did. Birley (1987:23) states that many upper class people were provincial

but saw themselves as truly Roman, even though during especially the reign of Hadrian, Greek culture was on the rise. The Roman elite however were satisfied, diligent and conscious of their own virtues (Birley 1987:23).

In order to provide a broader perspective on the issues investigated in this thesis, especially including slavery, some thoughts concerning economic and social issues are pertinent. McLynn (2009:4) argues that the Roman economy was underdeveloped, with many of the people living in poverty and with massive class inequality. McLynn (2009:6) argues that the one thing that differentiated their economy was the fact that it was supported by slavery. According to MacMullen (1974:38) if one starts at the birth of Cicero and considers the Empire's socio-economic development over five centuries, one clearly sees a trend of "fewer have more". MacMullen (1974:94) argues that the differences between the various upper and lower classes were immense. This inequality, in various ways, underlies the three focus areas of the study, but it is especially pertinent to the issues concerning slavery.

If one considers Marcus Aurelius' familial relationships and friendships, one has to explore the Roman ethos concerning the emperor and his political actions. By exploring the question of the Roman expectations of their leader, one can build a meaningful perspective of the socio-political environment in which Marcus Aurelius was expected to operate. Goodman (1997:127) argues that the emperor, as highest authority, declared laws and it was his duty to oversee the morals of his people. Therefore it stands to reason that the emperor's personal characteristics, his social background and the way in which he took action, would have been important in the eyes of the Roman people. As an example the tradition of *euergetism*, or the rich distributing to the poor, would have been one of these actions.

As can be seen in Birley (1987:12-13), from the perspective of the upper classes and the senate, it was vital that the emperor was seen to be "one of them". Birley maintains that this provided them with a strange sense of security. It is important to remember that after years of civil strife, everyone wanted more stability (Birley 1987:12-13). Birley (1987:13) further argues that Augustus, as first emperor, was cunning enough to realise that he needed to enable the Senate to rule with him, even if only for appearances' sake. In this respect, one can see that Marcus Aurelius was ideally positioned, if one takes into consideration his *gens*, as discussed in the following paragraph, and the fact that he was adopted by Antoninus Pius, as directed by Hadrian. This adoption, one can argue, securely confirmed his status as future Emperor, but also as one of senatorial status. Within this consideration it then becomes apparent that the tradition of adoption could have had as part of its purpose the promotion of the individual to the standard held by the Senate. The adoption of

Vespasian and Trajan, serves as an example. At the same time much of the evidence points in the direction that Marcus Aurelius did take the input of the Senate seriously, thereby endearing himself to them.

As already established, Birley (1987:28) mentions that Marcus Aurelius was born into the Annii *gens*, which was not particularly renowned in the annals of Rome, but his great-grandfather, Annii Verus, initiated the success of the *gens*. McLynn (2009:14) states that he was a wealthy olive trader who progressed to senatorial rank. It was however during the career of his ambitious son Marcus Annii Verus (Marcus Aurelius' grandfather) that the family really became prominent, when Vespasian recognised him as a patrician. McLynn (2009:14) states that Marcus Annii Verus also married well, linking the Annii *gens* through kinship to the emperor Hadrian, his new mother-in-law was the mother (by another husband) of Vibia Sabina, the wife of the Hadrian. McLynn (2009:14) points out that Marcus Aurelius' maternal grandmother, Domitia Lucilla (with the same name as his mother), was also very wealthy and well-connected. Consequently Marcus Aurelius was related to a number of prominent aristocratic families in Rome (McLynn 2009:14). Since he was of patrician class, consideration must then be given to the possibility that Marcus Aurelius' actions and attitudes would have been influenced by his families' upper-class ethos, as alluded to in section 2.1.

As an example of this influence one may consider Marcus Aurelius' father, Marcus Annii Verus who passed away when Marcus Aurelius was only three; while the latter apparently had no clear memory of him, he recalled his modesty and manly character (see *Meditations* i.2 and section 2.1.1 of this study), an understanding probably derived from his father's general reputation (McLynn 2009:13-15). His family connections meant that Marcus Aurelius was perfectly situated to be considered as "one of them", by the Senators.

But ancestry was not the only trait the Romans considered important in a good Emperor. Peachin (2006:149) states that Augustus' *Res Gestae* and Pliny's *Panegyric* indicate that the main duties of an emperor were to fend for the population, defend the Empire and adopt the correct imperial demeanour. Peachin points out that these characteristics were judged as important to the Senate, as well as to the soldiers and plebs. Goodman (1997:25) argues that rhetorical skill was also highly prized in a society where political ideas were communicated through speeches and by word of mouth; it was seen as crucial in the pursuit of political power. If one considers Goodman's statement, Marcus Aurelius' partiality for philosophy and his apparent move from rhetoric to philosophy, may surely be seen as an unusual occurrence in the development of a Roman emperor.

In utilising Herodian's description of Marcus Aurelius' education of Commodus as a window on what was expected of an emperor of the period, one discovers many of the characteristics of an ideal

emperor which Herodian *RH* i.2.1 argues were aligned with education<sup>24</sup> and culture<sup>25</sup>. Herodian suggests that an emperor's attitude towards his subjects should be one of gentleness and moderation and that in his judicial duties he must be mild and disciplined as opposed to the cruel excesses of tyranny. *RH* i.2.4 emphasises the importance of a ruler's accessibility by using the example of Marcus Aurelius<sup>26</sup>. An Emperor that is virtuous in being superior to wealth and birth is also emphasised in *RH* i.2.2.

In reviewing the characteristics of a good emperor in the eyes of Roman society one finds similarities to the Stoic view of a monarch. This is imperative to review, in order to understand the full framework of external influences on Marcus Aurelius. It is also important to note that according to Rawson (1989:233), it was a common trend for emperor's to have philosophical advisors. One saw Marcus Aurelius studying under philosophical teachers, but Rawson states that philosophers actually acted as "honoured political advisors" to emperors. Rawson goes on to quote Dio Chrysostom's 49<sup>th</sup> *Discourse*, where he states that one of the biggest beliefs amongst Greeks, at the time was that a ruler should at least take a philosopher as advisor, if indeed he could not himself become a philosopher King. Rawson (1989:247) points out that there were those who thought of Seneca as a political advisor. Griffin (2002:533) points to Seneca's *de clementia* where Seneca claims that "Stoic doctrine was an appropriate source of advice for *principes*" (*Clem.* II.5.2). When discussing the specific duties of an Emperor, Brunt (2013:292) references Seneca, who said that an Emperor must be "vigilant for the safety of each and all" and that "the Emperor belongs to the state, not the state to him" (*Clem.* I.3, 3; 19, 8. Cf.).

Brunt (2013:292-293) states that Seneca, when making recommendations to the Emperor Nero, advised him to "win his subjects' consent, by respecting public opinion and freedom of speech and to observe laws. Under a good leader, peace, justice, morality, security and the hierarchical social order will be upheld, and economic prosperity will be assured." Brunt (2013:293) argues that the Stoics emphasise *clementia* in a leader and it was accepted that the Emperor should follow the tradition of his subjects. Brunt (2013:293) suggests that Marcus Aurelius had a similar view and the study will attempt to demonstrate this in section 3.3 below. According to De Blois (2012:173) one

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<sup>24</sup> "...distinguished scholars from all over the world were summoned by Marcus Aurelius to attend Commodus and educate him for quite considerable fees".

<sup>25</sup> "Being a well-read man Marcus Aurelius was worried when he recalled rulers in the past who had succeeded to power as young men; for example Dionysius, the Sicilian tyrant, who used to pay high prices for exquisite, novel pleasures because he lacked sufficient self-control; and there were the excesses and violence of Alexander's successors towards their subjects whereby they brought shame on Alexander's rule" (*RH* i.3.2).

<sup>26</sup> "As an emperor he was merciful and fair to his subjects by receiving petitioners and not allowing his bodyguard to drive away people that approached him."

also sees Marcus Aurelius' view on the characteristics of an ideal ruler in *Meditations* i.16, where Marcus discusses the qualities of Antoninus Pius, showing his view on emperorship.

Morford (2002:27) argues that Cicero and a Stoic such as Panaetius, emphasised that it was a virtuous person's duty to be active in political life and that this principle was in line with Roman ideals of public service. One also sees this in Cicero's principles (*Cic., De Off.* 1.124 (= frag. 121V) of the ideal Roman leader, as quoted by Morford (2002:27):

It is therefore the proper duty of the magistrate to understand that he wears the mask of the state (*personam civitatis*); that his duty is to uphold the dignity and honour of the state, to preserve its laws and define its rights, and to remember that these things have been entrusted to his good faith.

In this, the state is positioned as the ideal leader, with the emperor's own characteristics merging with those of the state which he leads and serves. The study will show in section 3.3 that Marcus Aurelius carefully thought about his place in the hierarchy and took his duty as leader very seriously.

Griffin (2002:536) references Seneca's *de Clementia*, which refers to the virtuous leader. In this work Seneca states that the "ruler has power comparable to the gods over individuals and nations" (I.1.2, 5-7), but that a ruler is also limited in his actions: "He must imitate their justice, beneficence and clemency in using it (I.5.7, 7, 26.5); he must be to his citizens as he would wish the gods to be to him (I.7.1). Here one see that the Stoic doctrine leads a leader, such as Marcus Aurelius, to mimic the prescribed doctrine of Roman ethics, as prescribed the gods and not as an individual, even though as Griffin (2002:536) indicates, that once emperor, he can act without legal restraints, due to his position.

From a broader perspective, Brunt's (2013:7) arguments that Stoics had no leaning towards a specific type of government, but were more concerned with the moral conduct of those in power and that social roles ruled an individual's duty to others, are of extreme importance here. Duties for different roles were based upon by the opinions and actions of the society that it took place in. Brunt (2013:7) argues that a combination of a person's consciousness of their place in society, their own capabilities and talents on the one hand and the Stoic ideals around moral indifference to pain and punishment on the other would have led to a commitment to be steadfast in one's convictions, while performing the duties conventionally attached to one's station. Brunt (2013:7) also argues here that Stoicism therefore did not stimulate reform of the traditional order but, rather, focussed on the proper execution of one's place within that order. In section 4.3, Marcus Aurelius' tendency to keep the old in lieu of change is discussed as an expression of this Stoic tendency.



As seen earlier in section 2.2.3, there was a trend in Marcus Aurelius' time to return to the moral values endorsed by the philosophers. Rutherford (1989:79-80) argues that this is demonstrated in sections of Book I of the *Meditations*, where the principles of simplicity and self-control are emphasised<sup>27</sup>. From this one can reason that Marcus Aurelius' socio-political actions would have been based on what was morally correct from both a Roman and a Stoic perspective.

Goodman (1997:147) argues that Rome's military prowess, which led to Italy being the biggest economic force at the beginning of the imperial period, resulted in them having the greatest proportion of slaves purely due to captives won in war. By the time Marcus Aurelius became emperor, more than half a million slaves were required annually. At the same time the fortunes of the first century CE were declining (see McLynn 2009:9, 12). According to McLynn (2009:3), when Marcus Aurelius became Emperor, the census count may have been between 70 and 80 million people in total. The slave population was around 7–10 million, with at least 500 000 slaves in Rome alone.

Ando (2006:189) argues that this great number of citizens from various classes created pressure on both magistrates and Roman governors, with the result that especially magistrates would succumb and make judgements according to local Roman ideals, as understood by them in their specific regions within the empire, which was not necessarily the overall consensus, but rather pointed to the regional diversity within the empire. I suggest that this could have resulted in many subjective judgements.

Goodman (1997:147) argues that the economic benefits of slavery were marginal. Slaves worked hard and long hours, but they also cost money. This meant that they were often granted their freedom after a certain number of years, which resulted in large numbers of ex-slaves.

The following section reflects on the position Marcus Aurelius, as Stoic, found himself in with regards to slavery. If one considers the Stoic ideal with regards to freedom, Rees (1961:xvi) maintains that Stoicism faced the issue squarely, but that their view was very inwardly focussed (see *Meditations* xii.1). Brunt (1998:140) points out that Stoics limited themselves to recommending just and kind treatment to slaves, but that they saw the issue of freedom as more of a spiritual concept. In their eyes, anyone, including slaves could obtain freedom, provided they behaved in a morally good way. Rees (1961:xvi) argues that this focus on the self and on morality gave a Stoic like Marcus Aurelius no real choice when it came to an issue such as slavery. Since, even for Stoics, traditional beliefs and

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<sup>27</sup>E.g. in *Meditations* vii.1: "from my mother ... to live the simple life, a life far from the habits of the rich; 'from my tutor ... not to shirk toil, and to have small needs; to do my own work and not to interfere'".



attitudes often took precedence over freedom as an absolute principle radical social reform was not a priority.

So, if one considers these arguments by Rees, one can see why the debate of such topics would not have resulted in large-scale social or political change. Likewise, Brunt (2013:10) argues that Stoicism did not have an important humanitarian influence on Roman law and society. In general Brunt argues that Stoics accepted society as it was (Brunt 2013:10).

Marcus Aurelius, according to Brunt (1998:139), often said that he had a responsibility to all who were his kinsmen and shared in divine reason, but in essence he also accepted society as it was (See Cf. Dalfen's index to *M* under *syngeneia*, *sygenes*). Brunt (1998:139) argues that for the rest of the Roman masses, who owned no slaves, abolition made even less sense, as it provided some consolation that they were not the lowest within the social structure. One can therefore see that slavery was a fact of life during the second century CE and that neither Roman nor Stoic ways of thinking would have pushed the emperor to promote abolition.

As with slavery, religion was also deeply embedded in the Roman ethos. The following paragraphs explore these views and some religious developments within the Empire; it also gives a portrayal of the apparent chronological confusion and some irregularities with regards to the historical facts of the period (as discussed for example in Birley 1987:258). It is therefore pertinent to keep in mind throughout the section on religion that few of the facts are truly verifiable and the study therefore attempts to stay clear of categorical pronouncements.

Dio *RH* lii.36.1-2 as quoted by Rutherford (1989:262-263) points out that there existed a number of religious and philosophic movements during Marcus Aurelius' rule. Rutherford argues that these movements all had their own views, but were also strangely influenced by each other. Fredriksen (2006:590-591) warns that religion during this period should not be viewed through a modern perspective and that ancient religions were more equal to cults, with rituals and offerings to Gods, which in the minds of ancients, solicited the gods' favour. Fredriksen (2006:591) further argues that the gods of foreigners were not regarded as problematic in any way and that people generally accepted that a huge number of gods existed. However, McLynn (2009:262) also argues that the Romans tended to reject the new and that in religious matters they were particularly conservative (see Dio *RH* lix.4.6; HA Hadrian xvi.2; xvi.5-6). The people were constantly reminded of the importance of the Olympian deities. Hence some suspicion of new religions did exist.

Fredriksen (2006:602) points out that there existed a fear of Christians. This fear was associated with the fact that Christians were credited with crimes such as cannibalism and infanticide, but once

a Christian appeared in court, the matter centred on showing respect for the emperor (Fredriksen 2006:602). If a Christian refused, they were often sentenced to death. As the study will show, much of the evidence around Christian persecution during this period comes from the history surrounding Christian martyrs, such as Justin and the martyrs of Lyon. The Roman people in general seemed uncertain and confused when it came to Christian customs, generally blaming Christians for natural disasters out of their control. Goodman (1997:328) argues that the number of Christian martyrs during the first two centuries CE, was proportionately not many, but the value of their actions was widely spread, so that the memory of their actions was preserved.

But in order to understand the general atmosphere surrounding Christians around the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, we also have to look at the prominence of the Christian Apologists of the time. According to Rutherford (1989:262-263) the Apologists who wrote to Marcus Aurelius had the tendency to defend their faith through the perspective of Greek philosophy and the Second Sophistic, the latter of which would not have carried much authority with Marcus Aurelius. Although this was the established idiom of the period, it was also clearly an attempt by the Apologists to win the favour of the emperor. Hadot (1998:19) notes, interestingly, that the Christian Apologists, Athenagoras and Justin, went as far as to include the title of 'philosopher'<sup>28</sup> when addressing Marcus Aurelius. Their reasoning was that Christianity was the highest form of philosophy and that consequently, a Philosopher-Emperor should be sympathetic towards it.

In reviewing Stoic thought on Christianity one has to consider the arguments by Thorsteinsson (2010:1) who points to the importance of the awareness of ancient Christian authors of the like-mindedness between Christianity and Stoicism, with specific reference to morality or ethics. Thorsteinsson (2010:15) argues that ethics and morality were the main themes that occupied the thought of first and second century Roman Stoics and he believes this to be in alignment with Roman culture in general, where morality enjoyed a prominent position. According to Thorsteinsson (2010:19), *Meditations* (ii.11; ix.11, ix.40 and xii.5) reflect convictions similar to those in Epictetus, around the gods' care for human well-being. One sees a similar position given to theology/cosmology as to the foundation of ethics (*Meditations* ii.5, ii.13; v.27, v. 33).

However, Thorsteinsson (2010:209) argues that the biggest difference between Stoicism and Christianity was that Stoic texts taught unreserved universal humanity (*philanthropia*), while Christian texts in fact, imply that only fellow believers deserve absolute humanity. He maintains that

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<sup>28</sup> see Wilken, R.L. 1984. *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, pp. 72-83. New Haven and Malherbe, A.J. 1985/86. "Not in a corner": early Christian apologetic in Acts 26:26', *the Second Century* 5, 197 n. 20.

this is the difference in the moral teachings of the two beliefs. Considering Marcus Aurelius' philosophical perspective and the fact that he was emperor, it is then easier to see how decision-making around Christianity would have been strongly influenced by both his Roman and Stoic side. As emperor he had to be seen to follow Roman ethics, since it would have resulted in his demise as emperor if he did not keep the people satisfied and I believe that he absolutely believed in the Roman tradition of numerous deities. Privately his Stoic beliefs would have made him argue that any person deserves humanity regardless of their faith and it would possibly have been difficult for him to condemn Christians outright, simply because of they believed only true believers deserved absolute humanity.

Having considered a number of the most prominent influences in Marcus Aurelius' life, the study now moves on to an exploration of his own *Meditations*. Chapter 3 explores the purpose of the work as well as the most pertinent philosophical themes within the work. This gives one an intimate knowledge of the emperor and his views on various issues. Finally the chapter will investigate Marcus Aurelius' method of philosophy in more detail.

## CHAPTER 3: THE *MEDITATIONS*

### 3.1 Introduction

The *Meditations* form an integral part of this study, because, written in Marcus Aurelius' own words, it presents one with a unique window into Marcus Aurelius' inner world. The ultimate purpose of this chapter is to explore whether it is possible to show a correlation (or not) between the content of the *Meditations* and Marcus Aurelius' actions as emperor. This is difficult as the *Meditations* never really refers to specific incidents within Marcus Aurelius' life, so perhaps one should rather rephrase the above purpose as it seems more probable that one could infer more from the *Meditations* around Marcus Aurelius' actual approach to actions.

So, before the study looks into the purpose of the work and into the specific themes Marcus Aurelius deliberated within its pages, it is worth considering why the thoughts contained in the work are so important as a measure of the man and leader and whether these thoughts hold any indications on Marcus Aurelius' approach to actions. In essence, the *Meditations*, besides being an example of a Stoic work, presents one with a more balanced view of Marcus Aurelius' life, in that it gives us glimpses into both the positive and negative aspects of that which he considered important within the character of an individual. The *Meditations* is really more about that which Marcus Aurelius values, rather than about personal experiences.

Some sections in the *Meditations* highlight the positive aspects of Marcus Aurelius' life, such as his admiration in Book I for those influencers who taught him values which he holds dear and attempts to put into action throughout his life. As an example, one finds in *Meditations* i.3 the statement: "From my mother: piety and bountifulness, to keep myself not only from doing evil but even from dwelling on evil thoughts, simplicity too in diet and to be far removed from the ways of the rich."

Other sections in the *Meditations* highlight the negative or rather that which occupies Marcus Aurelius' mind and which he attempts to remind himself of, such as in *Meditations* ix.5: "Often he who omits an act does injustice, not only he who commits an act." And yet other sections speak directly to those values which Marcus Aurelius seems to be rectifying within his own actions. An example of which can be found in *Meditations* vi.3, which states: "Look to what is within: do not

allow the intrinsic quality or the worth of any one fact to escape you". These two quotes notably both talk about "taking action".

The first illustrates that even by not taking action, one inadvertently "acts". The second illustrates Marcus Aurelius' attempt to analyse and consider all, before taking action. Both quotes serve as an example of how the work assists us in exploring that which Marcus Aurelius apparently deems important when taking action. I would like to argue that in this sense Marcus Aurelius judges "consideration given" to be one of the prominent duties to keep in mind, prior to taking an action. This is consolidated in his thought in *Meditations* ix.7, which states: "Wipe out imagination: check impulse: quench desire: keep the governing self in its own control", meaning keep yourself focussed and in the cases above, focussed on considering all, before taking action. This is then why Marcus Aurelius' thought within the *Meditations* is of such importance to this study in that it gives us a definite picture of his approach when taking action.

The following section now considers the purpose of the *Meditations* or rather why Marcus Aurelius wrote the *Meditations*. In this I have to refer to the many scholars who have written numerous companion guides or commentaries on the *Meditations*, exploring each and every word written by Marcus Aurelius, resulting in a vast number of arguments and counter-arguments. By exploring Marcus Aurelius' actual purpose with the *Meditations*, one also explores his thought process and approach when taking action. Why take action and write a work such as the *Meditations*?

### **3.2 Personal diary or moral treatise?**

As stated, much has been written about the *Meditations*. Hadot (1998:vii-viii) warns that one has to guard against the deceptive transparency of the work, deceptive, mainly because of the misinterpretation of some of the sections by historians. Many of the historians or readers of the *Meditations* have projected their ideas from their own time onto the work (see speculations in Hadot 1998:25) and have not tried to understand the intended meaning of Marcus Aurelius' words.

In reviewing the history of the *Meditations* one finds that it is not known how the *Meditations* was preserved or copied. Morford (2002:230) however, points out that the *Meditations* was known of in Byzantine times and the first publication of the work dates back to 1559 in Zurich, by Andreas Gesner, together with a Latin translation by Xylander. Unfortunately the manuscript utilised by Xylander has been lost. This highlights the theory that the *Meditations* we have today, might not be the entire manuscript, which would make it difficult to draw conclusive evaluations around the purpose of the work. Brunt (2013:360-361) for instance, argues that many manuscripts of the period

have been lost and that for this reason there is no evidence to support the assumption that the *Meditations* is as complete a work as Marcus Aurelius had intended it to be.

Taking this into account, scholars have through the years greatly debated the sequence of chapters as we know them today. This was presumably done in order to provide more clarity on the completeness of the work and on whether it could indirectly even provide some insight into the purpose of the work. Here one must take into account Brunt's (2013:360-361) argument that the current sequence of the chapters could in fact not have been what Marcus had intended, which supports his theory that the work, might not be complete and was possibly consolidated by an editor. While the sequence of the chapters falls outside the limits of this study, the seemingly different purposes of the twelve books as suggested by Rutherford (1989:53), Brunt (2013:360-361), Farquharson (1961:89) and Hard (2011:10,16) are then important.

Brunt (2013:360) argues that Book I is a very personal document, while Books II-XII are "more of a spiritual diary". Rutherford (1989:53) on the other hand, sees definite linkages between the sections. According to Rutherford (1989:100) Book I covers mainly classical themes. Rutherford argues that this does not mean that Marcus Aurelius does not apply some of his personal thoughts to the topics, but rather that the philosophical themes that Marcus Aurelius wrote into the work provide a philosophical framework as basis for his thought, a concept that the study explores in more depth in section 3.2. In addition it provides him with the benefit of distancing himself from the viewpoint in any specific paragraph, so that it becomes almost reflective in style. In addition, Rutherford (1989:101) argues that the brief and apparently casual style of references within the work becomes significant if one considers that it demonstrates Marcus Aurelius' own reticence within the *Meditations*. I have found this to be illustrated in for example *Meditations* i.1: "From my grandfather Verus: the lessons of noble character and even temper" or *Meditations* i.2: "From my father's reputation and my memory of him: modesty and manliness".

Rutherford (1989:103, 123-124) points out that in Books II-XII Marcus Aurelius demonstrates many of the tasks of instruction or criticism that he received from his mentors in Book I. This includes his unease over moral improvement, his choice of subjects (see *Meditations* i.7.1-2), modesty, frankness, tolerance (see *Meditations* i.9.i; i.16.5), gratitude and respect for his tutors (see *Meditations* i.13). Rutherford (1989:123-124) also argues that it is apparent that in Book I Marcus Aurelius was far happier and his writing was more varied than in Books II-XII, where melancholy and pessimism seeps in. This I have found to be illustrated in *Meditations* i.14: "From Severus: love of family, love of truth and love of justice", as opposed to *Meditations* v.33:

In how short a time, ashes or a bare anatomy, and either a name or not even a name; and if a name, then a sound and an echo. And all that is prized in life empty, rotten, and petty; puppies biting on another, little children quarrelling, laughing, and then soon crying...

or opposed to *Meditations* viii.24:

As your bath appears to your senses – soap, sweat, dirt, greasy water, all disgusting – so is every piece of life and every object.

or opposed to *Meditations* ix.36:

The rottenness of the matter which underlies everything. Water, dust, bones, stench. Again: marble, an incrustation of earth; gold and silver, sediments; your dress, the hair of animals; the purple dye, blood, and so all the rest. What is of the nature of breath too is similar and changing from this to that.

These quotes seem to point to a development from optimism to pessimism in Marcus Aurelius' psyche.

However Rutherford (1989:124) highlights that there are also similarities between the various Books in that they represent Marcus Aurelius' "efforts to convince himself of absolute moral truths" (Rutherford 1989:124). His pessimism demonstrates the hardship it takes to attain these ideals.

The geographical areas in which the Books were written also assist in determining the chronology of Marcus Aurelius' life. Hard (2011:10, 16) points out that due to the heading of Book II: "Written among the Quadi on the River Gran" and Book III, "Written in Carnutum" one can infer that they were written in Germany on campaign. Farquharson (1961:98) suggests that Book II was likely written on campaign and in Moravia, where the battle of the Thundering Legion, famous in Christian legend, took place in 173 CE (see section 4.4). This book reflects the brevity and inconsequence of man's life, but in Book III a more optimistic quality prevails. The suggestion is that Marcus Aurelius felt relief at the end of the stressful campaign which resulted in him being proclaimed *Imperator* for a seventh time and gaining the title *Germanicus*. De Blois (2012:172) states that Marcus Aurelius' own thoughts seems not to be greatly influenced by all the military manoeuvres he had to undertake. Marcus puts his own perspective on his victories:

A spider is proud when he traps a fly, a man when he snares a leveret, another when he nets a sprat, another boars, another bears, another Sarmatian prisoners. If you test their sentiments, are they not bandits? (*Meditations* x.10)

If one considers the purpose of the work, one does find that these scholarly debates around the sequence of chapters and the differences between the individual Books already provide some insight into the character and philosophical views of Marcus Aurelius and, as stated in the beginning, assist us in better understanding his intentions in the approach to an action. However in an attempt to determine Marcus Aurelius' thought patterns within the *Meditations* it becomes vital to answer the questions from the introduction around the purpose of the work. Could it have been written as a moral treatise, or was it rather written in hind-sight as lessons learnt? Was it written for himself or in order to educate others and specifically his son Commodus? I believe this to be significant in that the answers to these questions may give us greater insight into Marcus Aurelius' character and whether he viewed the philosophical part of his life as a matter for public display or alternatively as a private practice. I would like to argue that if it was meant to be public, then surely philosophy and its beliefs would have formed a very visible part of his actions as Emperor, but if it was a private matter, then one might find that it was mostly visible to only those close to him and he would have utilised philosophy towards a very internally-focussed behaviour.

On the face of it scholars are in agreement as to the value of the *Meditations* and the fact that it is mainly Stoic in nature. However, they seem to be divided on the purpose and whether it can be classified as a truly Stoic moral treatise or rather as simply a personal diary. Hadot (1998:25) argues that Marcus Aurelius' purpose was to write a handbook of valuable advice for the philosophical life. He agrees with Farquharson (1944:lxiv-lxvii), that it can be compared to the *Meditations* of Guiges' of Chartres, the famous *Religio Medici* of Thomas Browne, and above all the *Pensées* of Pascal.

In general, I have to argue that Marcus Aurelius considered philosophy to be a personal journey rather than a publicly displayed exercise and that some support for this statement lies in Wiedemann's (1989:5) arguments around the format of the *Meditations*. Wiedemann maintains that the *Meditations* is built up out of a number of moral reflections, which Marcus Aurelius as Emperor, must have deemed important, since he documented it in the *Meditations*. However Wiedemann goes on to argue that Marcus Aurelius did not see these reflections as important within his official capacity, but rather as those of a normal individual challenging the world. Consideration has to be given as to whether Marcus Aurelius could have publicly displayed these moral reflections without upsetting the existing Roman ethos and even the relationships with those close to him. If this is true, then it is again displayed later in the study when we see Marcus Aurelius shying away from confrontation in respect of his socio-political relations, such as in the accusations of infidelity against his wife Faustina and his almost excessive praise of his father, the Emperor Antoninus Pius, all which is discussed in detail in chapter 4.



McLynn (2009:204), similarly to Wiedemann and Hadot, speculates that the writings were possibly used as a type of meditative technique. He maintains that the obvious comparison for the *Meditations* would be the spiritual exercises of Ignatius Loyola, who founded the Jesuit order. Loyola's writings, according to McLynn were a method of self-discipline and self-address and recall the Eastern concept of daily spiritual hard work in order to rise to ever higher levels of consciousness.

The alternative view to consider here is the argument upheld by many scholars that the purpose of the *Meditations* is that of a type of personal diary and that Marcus Aurelius had written it for himself and not for publication. Hazlitt and Hazlitt (1984:3), by way of illustration, reason that the work was written as a type of reflection, resolve or personal advice. They also argue that it contains much duplication, which points to Marcus Aurelius never having edited the writing. It is logical to assume that if the work was meant for publication, it would have been edited.

Hadot (1998:24) points out that after various translations and the publication of the *Meditations* in 1559, many titles were given to the work<sup>29</sup>. Although these titles reflect the interpretation that it was a personal journal, Hadot (1998:30) argues that the *Meditations* is rather an exercise that Marcus Aurelius practised within set rules; he also argues that it gives us a glimpse of the intellectual activity to which Marcus Aurelius had devoted himself throughout his life. Hadot (1998:31) therefore argues that the *Meditations* is part of a type of writing called *hypomnēmata* in antiquity<sup>30</sup>. Hadot (1998:33) goes on to explain that this was a type of inner dialogue and formed part of a very specific literary genre, of which there is only one written and published example: the *Soliloquies* of Augustine. However, Hadot argues that Augustine's work moves through a variety of stages which leads to the completion of a literary work as prescribed in antiquity, whereas the *Meditations* remains at stage one - the composition of rough thoughts on tablets. Hadot (1998:33) points out that there is no evidence of the second stage – the composition of a provisional version of the work, or a third stage – a definitive revision of the work. It is unclear whether this incompleteness then suggests that Marcus simply ran out of time or whether it was intentional.

McLynn (2009:204-205) believes the work is not a diary, nor an ordinary book, but does argue that it was never meant to be publicised. This supports my argument that Marcus Aurelius might have viewed philosophy as a private pursuit.

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<sup>29</sup> Hadot (1998:24-25) says: "Xylander proposed: 'On Himself or on his Life'. In the editions of Strasburg (1590) and of Lyon (1626) the title was 'On his life'. Meric Casaubon gave the title: 'About Himself and to Himself'; but the English translations entitled the work '*Meditations* concerning himself'. Thomas Gataker called it: 'On His Private Affairs, or the Matters which He Thought Concerned him'. The Latin translation called it: 'Notes which He Wrote for Himself'; the French: 'Moral thoughts'; or simply 'thoughts' and in German: 'Reflections on Himself' or 'with Himself'; or 'Paths toward Himself'."

<sup>30</sup> "Personal notes taken on a day-to-day basis." (Hadot 1998:31-32)

McLynn (2009:205) also argues that in his view the main reason one cannot define the *Meditations* as a diary, lies in the fact that it was written in Greek, the language of philosophy and not in Latin, the language of rhetoric and Marcus Aurelius' mother tongue, as one would have assumed. This could be feasible, but it must be remembered that Lucretius, Cicero and Seneca had established Latin as a language for philosophy too. A more feasible argument is probably that of Grant (1996:111) who argues that writing in Greek was seemingly more of a strain for Marcus Aurelius and this is revealed in the use of uncommon phrases within the work. Could this mean that Marcus Aurelius had an absolute love of all things Greek and therefore challenged the norm of writing in his mother tongue? Goodman (1997:156) insists that the Emperor Hadrian and the Antonines had a clear preference for Greek culture and elevated it within the entire Roman Empire during the second century CE. It was exemplified in Roman culture through the habit amongst Roman aristocrats of this period, including Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius, of wearing a beard, the distinctive mark of a Greek adult male. So could one infer that by writing in Greek, Marcus Aurelius was simply following the Emperor Hadrian's preference for all things Greek? This is possible, but I agree with McLynn and also an argument by Reydam-Schils (2010:561-562), where the simple explanation exists that Marcus Aurelius wrote the *Meditations* in Greek purely because he viewed it as a philosophic work. An additional consideration here is to consider why one would use a language not one's own in which to jot down one's own intimate thoughts, not meant for wider circulation. A plausible argument here could be that Marcus Aurelius utilised Greek in order to exclude others from reading the *Meditations*, further emphasising that it was meant to be a private journal.

Goodman (1997:74) has a different hypothesis. He suggests that with the Empire under constant threat of both war and natural disasters during Marcus Aurelius' reign and with him constantly being on campaign, he quite possibly wrote the *Meditations* while being very lonely; in the work he ponders the nature of sovereignty and duty, the two things that had unwillingly driven him to perform the role of a military leader, which (as with the first Caesars) still remained a core duty of the leader of the Roman Empire.

Goodman (1997:74) argues that the *Meditations* display an intense moral sensibility and a deep loathing for many of Marcus Aurelius' responsibilities, and I would suggest also for his actions in war. Goodman continues his argument that in *Meditations* ii.5<sup>31</sup> one witnesses Marcus Aurelius' portrayal

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<sup>31</sup> "Each hour be minded, valiantly as becomes a Roman and a man, to do what is to your hand, with precise ... and unaffected dignity, natural love, freedom and justice; and to give yourself repose from every other imagination. And so you will, if only you do each act as though it were your last, freed from every random aim, from wilful turning away from the directing Reason, from pretence, self-love and displeasure with what is allotted to you. You see how few things a man

of the use of power as a liability. Within this quote I believe one again sees Marcus Aurelius approach to his actions, how he “do[es] each act as though it were [his] last”, clearly again, demonstrating his total commitment to fulfil his duty as honour bound as possible, but deeply disturbed by his required actions.

This is supported by Goodman’s (1997:74) argument that two of the greatest statues representing Marcus Aurelius as emperor, his equestrian statue and his depiction on the column of Marcus Aurelius, portray him as a military victor and hero. Goodman argues that this is in stark juxtaposition to Marcus Aurelius’ attitude as youth, where he was seen as an example of intelligence and character. In addition Goodman argues that the man emerging from the *Meditations* stands in contrast with the luxurious life, desire for military glory and the blatant political ambition of Augustus (see *Meditations* ii.5). Marcus Aurelius in my view has developed from an innocent yet honourable youth to a disillusioned leader, battling with his conscience.

It seems that scholars have found some agreement on the opinion that the work seems to have never been intended as a moral treatise. I would like to argue that if the work indeed reflects personal reflections, as most scholars agree, it presents us with a valid window on Marcus Aurelius’ own thoughts. Brunt (2013:364) believes that in reading some of the passages, one can clearly see that no one else could benefit from the advice, except for Marcus. I would want to argue that not even his son Commodus could have benefitted as all of the *Meditations* is based on the fighting of Marcus Aurelius’ own inner demons. This is seen for instance in the remark: “act always as the disciple of Pius” (see *Meditations* vi.30.2). This Brunt believes is a very strong indication that the work was meant to be personal.

I therefore find that the value of the *Meditations* as a window on Marcus Aurelius’ mind and as a method of dating is clear. The work quite possibly also had deeper functionality for Marcus Aurelius, possibly as *hypomnēmata* or a type of self-examination. According to Irmgard (2012:372) these are spiritual exercises seen as practical ethics which leads to the formation of the inner self and through the *Meditations* Marcus Aurelius is analysing himself intensely.

What is apparent when exploring the *Meditations*, is that one has to take into account the argument of Hadot (1998:vii-viii) who believes that the attractiveness of the *Meditations* for a modern reader lies in the simplicity of the writing, its briefness and sayings. I find *Meditations* viii.36, which could find tremendous resonance in today’s modern world, an excellent illustration:

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need master in order to live a smooth and god-fearing life; for the gods themselves will require nothing more of him who keeps these precepts” (*Meditations* ii.5).

Do not allow the imagination of the whole of your life to confuse you, do not dwell upon all the manifold troubles which have come to pass and will come to pass, but ask yourself in regard to every present piece of work: what is there here that can't be borne and can't be endured? You will be ashamed to make the confession. Then remind yourself that it is not the future of the past that weighs upon you, but always the present, and that this gradually grows less, if only you isolate it and reprove your understanding, if that is not strong enough to hold out against it, thus taken by itself.

I feel that this quote clearly represents the attractiveness of the *Meditations* to the modern reader and explains the absolute longevity of the work. The next section explores Marcus Aurelius' version of Stoic philosophy, as it emerges from the pages of the *Meditations*. This philosophy is embodied in the *Meditations* and attempts to open a window on Marcus Aurelius' inner world.

### **3.3 A window on Marcus Aurelius' inner world**

The study has already hinted at some of the prominent themes within the *Meditations*, through the highlighting of quotes from the work in the previous section, but it will now explore Marcus Aurelius' thought and the specific themes in more depth in an attempt to focus on his philosophy of actions. I have emphasised throughout the study that Marcus Aurelius had a continuous thirst for knowledge and a wish to continually develop himself intellectually and also morally. Although Marcus Aurelius may have acted inconsistently or even unexpectedly within some areas of his reign, he was not averse to admitting his mistakes and learning from them. He strove to define these mistakes, analyse them and improve his behaviour, as is witnessed in the *Meditations*. In my opinion while the *Meditations* provide the evidence for this, they can also be viewed as a critical step within this process.

In reviewing some of Marcus Aurelius' specific reasoning within the work, I want to put forward that this is probably the essence of the *Meditations*, namely Marcus Aurelius providing his own insight into everyday issues and utilising his own advice in developing his character and actions. This is supported by McLynn's (2009:226) argument that in some sections the popular Marcus Aurelius of modern times comes to the fore. Many of his remarks are read as if he is "dispensing little truths to a modern audience", for example in utterances like: "Never assume something's impossible because you find it hard. You should recognise that, if it's humanly possible, you can do it too" (*Meditations* vi.19), which are common in popular wisdom today.

Yet, McLynn (2009:227) suggests that this does not reflect the real Marcus Aurelius and I have to agree. I argue that from a modern outlook one probably sees the quotes in the *Meditations* as

singular, short bits of inspiration, but I don't believe that this was Marcus Aurelius' true intention. Consideration has to be given that Marcus Aurelius saw the *Meditations* as a combination of moral truths, which both tormented him and inspired his actions in order to achieve absolute morality. One witnesses this, especially in his quotes around death and evil, such as in *Meditations* ii.6:

You are doing yourself violence, violence, my soul; and you will have no second occasion to do yourself honour. Brief is the life of each of us, and this of yours is nearly ended, and yet you do not reverence yourself, but commit your well-being to the charge of other men's souls.

McLynn's (2009:227) argument supports this and points out that Marcus Aurelius is really seen in some of the more eccentric expressions: in matters of religion, in Marcus' treatment of evil, and in his reflections on death, the latter of which I believe is reflected in *Meditations* ii.4:

Now is it high time to perceive the kind of Universe whereof you are a part and the nature of the governor of the Universe from whom you subsist as an effluence and that the term of your time is circumscribed, and that unless you use it to attain calm of mind time will be gone and you will be gone and the opportunity to use it will not be yours again.

In a similar vein Gill (2011:vii) argues that Marcus Aurelius amazingly finds the inner strength to cope with the challenges related to such issues and in the course of his efforts, determining his own social role while trying at the same time to recognise the moral significance of these issues within the world.

The above section showcases a variety of themes within the work, but, the prevalent thought amongst scholars seems to be, as Hadot (1998:35) argues, that the *Meditations* has only one theme, namely philosophy, which Hadot believes can be seen from statements like the following: "What is it that can escort you in order to protect you in this life?" Marcus Aurelius' answer points to only one thing, "philosophy", or in the words of Rutherford (1989:88) "ethical progress".

Rutherford (1989:70) highlights that Marcus Aurelius is very aware that philosophy is not something that should remain on a theoretical level, but that it should form part of a person's entire way of living, as Marcus Aurelius says in *Meditations* x.16: "Put an end once and for all to discussion of what a good man ought to be, and be one". I would like to argue that this statement by Marcus Aurelius reflects his desire to put into action these moral truths and that it shows intent from his side, rather than simply serving as advice.

Hadot (1998:35-42) has placed this intent into a context which I find very helpful in the explanation of Marcus Aurelius' reasoning within the *Meditations*. Hadot's perspective serves to expose Marcus

Aurelius' own method of philosophy, focussing on the philosophy of actions. The following section provides an overview of Hadot's reasoning in an attempt to understand Marcus Aurelius' own personal brand of Stoic philosophy.

Hadot (1998:35-36) in his analyses of the *Meditations*, points out that he has found three rules of life present in the work:

Always and everywhere, [1] it depends on you piously to be satisfied with the present conjunction of events, [2] to conduct yourself justly toward whatever other people are present, and [3] to apply the rules of discernment to the inner representation you are having now, so that nothing which is not objective may infiltrate its way into you.

According to Hadot (1998:36) these form recurring themes within the *Meditations* and although the rules reflect a global attitude, they also refer to a basic inner choice, which is expressed by Marcus Aurelius, following Epictetus, as *dogmata* (*Meditations* ii.3.3; iii.13.1; iv.49.6). One finds in Stoicism the principle that the self is responsible for all actions. This creates an interesting theory around Marcus Aurelius as emperor on whom so much depends. As emperor he is in essence responsible for the entire empire. It is this responsibility that one sees reflected throughout his reign. These rules broadly frame the combined personal characteristics or "inner disposition" that is in turn displayed in the three rules of action, with which Hadot (1998:36) argues almost all the themes in *Meditations* is linked. The three rules of action which Hadot formulates are: [1] "the only good is moral good and at the same time the only evil is moral evil" (see *Meditations* ii.1.3); [2] our judgement and our concurrence depends on us (see *Meditations* xii.22); and [3] everything comes from and conforms to the will of universal nature (see *Meditations* xii.26).

One sees in this Marcus Aurelius' reasoning when it comes to taking an action. The fact that he analyses and separates the good from the evil first, but at the same time considers the providential nature of the action and what effect it will have on those affected is important for the arguments present in the study.

Hadot (1998:183) explains action as responsibility that becomes engaged. This, Hadot argues, forces one to interact with others even if they provoke you. One has to love all human beings, even if you dislike them. Here Hadot (1998:183) formulates three responsibilities, the first being to "act in the service of the whole". The second responsibility according to Hadot (1998:183) "is to respect the hierarchy of values which can exist between different types of action"; and the third is "to love everyone, because everyone belongs to one single body". The third responsibility one can see reflected in Marcus Aurelius' social relationships, which is focussed on in chapter 4 of the study. In

this chapter one observes how Marcus Aurelius overlooks any possible character flaws in those close to him. Indirectly one witnesses Marcus almost willing those close to him to achieve what he believes is the correct moral behaviour and his disappointment when they fail. Yet he continues to support them and in Book I one finds him almost glossing over their inadequacies, highlighting only their positive characteristics (also see *Meditations* i.16 and i.17).

Hadot (1998:185) argues that for Marcus Aurelius, as Stoic, the ultimate goal of one's actions must be to create good within the community. Therefore the discipline of action encapsulates one's relationships with others and these relationships are in turn governed by laws and duties which are enforced on us by "human, rational nature and reason". Human, rational nature and reason can be directly compared and are identical to "universal nature and reason" (Hadot 1998:185). This then also speaks to Marcus Aurelius' principle of actions, as it shows us his ultimate goal, which he has adopted on the basis of an overall assessment of his options and opportunities. Besides being illustrated in Marcus Aurelius' close relations, it is also illustrated in Marcus Aurelius' judgements around slavery, which as the study will show, are mainly considered to be *in favore libertatis*, a principle that one can argue is grounded in this goal of creating good within the community.

Hadot (1998:184-185) argues that Marcus Aurelius surrendered himself entirely to justice, as far as his actions were concerned and to universal nature when it came to everything which happened to him (see *Meditations* x.11.2). One finds in the *Meditations* a constant sub-theme of providence, which is supported by Hadot's (1998:184-185) argument that in the *Meditations* Marcus Aurelius emphasises a symmetrical contrast between action and desire: "Act as your own nature commands you; put up with whatever common Nature brings to you" (*Meditations* xii.32.3). To my mind this is the true Marcus Aurelius. The study has shown earlier his reservations about his role, yet throughout Marcus Aurelius' life we see him accepting his destiny and duty without hesitancy.

Hadot (1998:184-185) continues his reasoning and emphasises the importance of action and the issue that the actions which are executed will naturally enforce the standards of reason and reflection of the acting human being upon people affected by the action. The study has touched on this idea earlier, namely that one has to take into consideration those affected by your actions in the analyses of the facts prior to the action. This is also supported by Hadot's (1998:185) highlighting of Marcus Aurelius' thoughts on the seriousness of actions in *Meditations* xii. 20:

In the first place: nothing at random, and nothing that is not related to some goal. Second: do not relate your actions to anything other than a goal which may serve the human community (*Meditations* xii. 20).

Here Hadot (1998:186) draws our attention to Marcus Aurelius' thoughts around the gravity of taking action and the focus and reflection needed in order to accomplish it:

Stop spinning around like a top; instead, on the occasion of every impulse to act, accomplish what is just, and whenever a representation presents itself, confine yourself to what corresponds exactly to reality (*Meditations* iv.22).

Hadot (1998:188) argues that Marcus Aurelius seemingly had an awareness of the importance of every instant, which again highlights how deeply the latter contemplated the seriousness of all actions and their consequences (*Meditations* vii.1.2):

On the occasion of each action, ask yourself this question: What is it to me? Will I not regret it? In a short time, I will be dead, and everything will disappear! If I now act as an intelligent living being, who places himself in the service of the human community and who is equal to God, then what more can I ask?

Hadot (1998:188) then turns to the topic of "appropriate actions" where one sees Marcus Aurelius referencing Epictetus' terminology and showing his knowledge of Epictetus' views, thus also demonstrating his Stoic persuasion. Marcus Aurelius, according to Hadot speaks here about actions performed "in the service of human community" (*Meditations* ix.6 and xi.37). Hadot (1998:189) attempts to place the relevance of actions in a Stoic perspective by asking "What is it, however, that makes a good, a moral good?"

The answers Hadot (1998:189) formulates point firstly to the notion that moral good is embedded within the human psyche and that secondly action must obey the law of reason. This points to the notion that there must exist the will to do good. But Hadot believes this provides a dilemma, in that it would not be enough to want to do good, but that the individual must know what concrete actions have to be taken to do good, since happiness is found within the moral purpose. Consequently, Hadot (1998:189) proposes that the Stoics utilised a practical code of conduct which provided a concrete guide for appropriate actions, in order that the individual does not spend time on worthless actions, which achieve nothing of significance. A person therefore needed to focus on actions which were appropriate and significant. The Stoics see these actions as duties, or social and political commitments, but they also consider that when making decisions doubts and worries may creep into the philosopher's soul and result in an action taken which is not based on natural instinct. Hadot (1998:189) argues that Stoics determine the correct action to be taken through gut-feel (natural instinct), but with reasoning and that the determination of an action therefore becomes a reflective choice. Hadot (1998:193) argues that in the vocabulary of the discipline of action, there is



a technical term, which means to “act with a reserve clause”. Hadot (1998:194) suggests that this implies a firm intention throughout decision-making and even prior to taking action, which can be found in Marcus Aurelius’ reference to Antoninus Pius, which Hadot (1998:193) points out in *Meditations* i.16.1, which states that Pius holds “Firm perseverance in decisions which are taken after mature reflection.”

I find that the consideration Marcus Aurelius gives prior to an action is a motif that consistently surfaces in this study and it is again demonstrated in Chapter 4 where the study points to Marcus Aurelius’ application of this principle in relation to his legal judgements. This serves to demonstrate how Marcus Aurelius deliberated endlessly over judgements, in order to ensure that all options and evidence were taken into account.

Hadot (1998:194) then moves on to the person who intends to carry out an action according to a specific moral intention and compares them to an archer who shoots at a target but has no control over outside influences. This metaphor I find important since it firstly demonstrates how little control an individual has over the results and consequences of their actions, but at the same time it also emphasises how much thought has to be put into an action, considering the ultimate goal, prior to taking that action. Marcus Aurelius however believes that moral action, by contrast is perfect (see *Meditations* xi.1.1-2)<sup>32</sup>. In *Meditations* iii.32 as quoted by Hadot (1998:195-196), Marcus Aurelius says:

You must set your life in order by accomplishing your actions one by one; and if each of them achieves its completion, insofar as is possible, then that is enough for you. What is more, no one can prevent you from achieving its completion.

This is completely in alignment with Stoic thought as, Hadot (1998:196) points out that the Stoic attitude here is threefold: firstly the Stoic concentrates on the here and the now, accomplishing actions one after another and not looking at the past or future, a principle expressed in *Meditations* vii.69.3, where Marcus Aurelius says: “For me, the present is constantly the matter on which rational and social virtue exercises itself”. I also find this indicative of Marcus Aurelius’ character. He is steadfast and focussed throughout his actions. As the study will highlight in the section on the persecution of Christians in Chapter 4, he is decisive and although he deliberates long and analyses all options prior to taking an action, in taking the action, he acts unwaveringly. What is important

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<sup>32</sup> “The rational soul achieves its proper end, wherever the limit of its life may be. It is not as in dance or the theatre or other such arts, in which, if something comes along to interrupt them, the entire action is incomplete. The action of the rational soul, by contrast – in all of its parts, and wherever it is considered – carries out its projects fully and without fail, so that it can say: I have achieved my completion”.

here is that one does see Marcus Aurelius' attempt at preparing sufficiently and the weighing-up of all options, prior to taking action. This presents us with a view on how he approached actions.

Secondly, Hadot (1998:196) says that Stoic concentration provides order in an individual's life. Problems are thus arranged in a series "and one is not troubled by the representations of an entire life" (*Meditations* viii.36.1). I infer from this that a Stoic clearly prioritises problems and does not consider all problems cohesively, but rather executes actions to counter problems one by one – a deeply focussed approach. If one considers the whole of *Meditations* viii.36, one sees that this quote is written in the context of "focussing on the present", so as not to allow too much of the past and future to interfere with your actions in the present day. This, I find, emphasises the principle of being present and focussing solely on the action needed. I don't believe that this indicates that a Stoic monarch such as Marcus Aurelius thought only about the present and had no long term vision. It is precisely the opposite: this focus enabled him to deal and act on a specific problem with complete concentration. This focus combined with the extraordinary unforeseen events that went wrong during his reign, earthquakes, plague, and etcetera, however could have resulted in him being reactive in his rule.

Thirdly, [3] each action is based on good intentions that can be completed successfully as one sees in *Meditations* viii.32, quoted by Hadot (1998:196):

No one can prevent you from having it attain its completion – but surely something external will prevent it from being completed! Be that as it may, no one can stop you from acting with justice, temperance and prudence. – But perhaps some other one of the action's effect will be prevented? – Perhaps, but if you adopt an attitude of serenity with regard to such an obstacle, and if you know how to return prudently to that which you are able to do, then another action will instantly take the place of the first one, and it will fit in with the harmony we are talking about (*Meditations* viii.32).

As Hadot (1998:196) argues: "this is the paradox mentioned by Seneca, to the effect that even if the sage fails, he succeeds. Here Marcus Aurelius, as Stoic, accepts that it is up to himself and that only he can ensure that his actions are complete.

Hadot (1998:200) finally argues that Marcus Aurelius believes that a wise person must be able to insist on the purity of intentions and that this must inspire their actions (*Meditations* vii.73-74; xi.4). I find that this exposition by Hadot contributes immensely towards understanding the context within which to understand the essence of Marcus Aurelius' philosophy, the manner in which he practised ethics and the manner in which he decided upon which action to take. It clearly explains Marcus

Aurelius' philosophy of actions, through his own words in *Meditations* and provides evidence of both Marcus Aurelius' analytical approach to actions as well as his Stoic focus when taking an action.

As Reydam-Schils (2010:569-570) argues, what set later Stoics, like Marcus Aurelius apart, is their theory that philosophy must serve as ethics in action. For the philosopher-emperor, theory and action are interlinked, but the emphasis must be on action. Because of this, the later Stoics emphasised education. They saw it as a bridge between theory and action. Evidence suggests Marcus Aurelius to be a good example of this, as has been demonstrated in the discussion of his education (in section 2.1), his love of books and knowledge and his actions.

The study has now considered Marcus Aurelius' character, education and his discovery of Stoic philosophy. The purpose of the *Meditations* was explored in this chapter as well as Marcus Aurelius' approach to actions and his own personal philosophy, as reflected in the *Meditations*.

I conclude the chapter with a short summary of arguments by three prominent scholars that to my mind aptly express the essence of Marcus Aurelius' actions as the philosopher-emperor. Throughout his life, Marcus Aurelius became more and more of a recluse. He was focussed and extremely aware of his duties and responsibilities as emperor and in my mind this made Marcus Aurelius extremely inwardly focussed. He drifted away from those close to him as he seemingly became more and more disillusioned with others and life in general. It is almost as if, as Stoic, he became exhausted with the effort of trying to act morally and within the bounds of humanity, but yet, still persevered. This is supported by Rutherford (1989:123) who quotes *Meditations* (ix.29) where Marcus Aurelius despairs "for who can change men's opinions? And without such a change what else is there but slavery of men who groan and sham obedience?"

I want to argue that this disillusionment is also visible in Marcus Aurelius' cynical observation in *Meditations* viii.25 where he talks about the many "acute minds" that have passed away:

Lucilla laid Verus in the grave, Lucilla followed; Secunda buried Maximus, Secunda next; Epitynchanus buried Diotimus, Epitynchanus next; Antoninus Faustina, Antoninus next. Where now are these acute minds, those who unveiled the future, those who were swollen with pride? Acute minds like Charax and Demetrius and Eudaemon and others of their kind. All creatures of a day, dead long since; some remembered not even for a little while, some turned to fable, and some even now fading out of fable. Keep these facts in mind that your own frame is bound either to be scattered into atoms or your spirit to be extinguished or to change its place and be stationed somewhere else.

This tendency is also implied in Rutherford's (1989:123) argument that moral obligation replaced personal contact and private warmth in Marcus Aurelius' later years. Rutherford argues that most of the people mentioned in Book I, were presumably dead by the time the *Meditations* were written, leading me to infer a deep loneliness in Marcus Aurelius' later years, which is then also reflected in the quote above.

Rutherford (1989:123) also argues that within the relationships Marcus Aurelius had left, he acted mainly with correction and admonition. This leads me to suggest that he seems to have grown tired of what he perceived to be the immorality of humans and those close to him and that he felt an irritation with them, thereby acting as master or judge over their actions. I quote Marcus Aurelius' own words in *Meditations* viii.59: "Men have come into the world for the sake of one another. Either instruct them then or bear with them".

The second scholar I would like to highlight as supporting the argument about Marcus Aurelius' growing disillusionment in general, is Morford (2002:11-12) who maintains that although Marcus Aurelius is the only example of a philosopher-emperor, it is far from the ideal of Plato (also see *Meditations* x.29). Morford (2002:12) argues that Marcus Aurelius found some hope in imagining a world beyond the often depressing every day routine of his daily responsibilities. Marcus Aurelius endeavoured to preserve Stoic virtue, but ended his *Meditations*, according to Morford (2002:12) with the call of "the Stoic god to die". Morford goes on to say that he was sustained by his own self-sufficiency and the fact that he shared this earth with gods and mortals and by his knowledge of the spiritual element in his soul. This statement supports my argument that Marcus Aurelius had become exhausted with the effort of his Stoic principles and the effort of his duties and acting morally within these duties. I find a general pessimistic attitude illustrated also in *Meditations* xii.32 where Marcus Aurelius says:

What a fraction of infinite and gaping time has been assigned to every man; or very swiftly it vanishes in the eternal; and what a fraction of the whole of matter, and what a fraction of the whole of the life Spirit. On what a small clod, too, of the whole earth you creep.  
Pondering all these things, imagine nothing to be great but this: to act as your own nature guides, to suffer what Universal Nature brings.

This quote shows a typical Stoic disillusionment creeping into Marcus Aurelius' inner thoughts and the weight of this realisation on his psyche. In the end he tells himself that he stands alone and that only he can drive himself forward.

This theme of being alone before the challenges of life is also reflected in Brunt (2013:304) who believes that Marcus Aurelius took inspiration from his own beliefs, not to reappraise or reform the traditional order. He preferred to rather fulfil his role within that order, conforming to the idea of an acceptable man of that period and class. He did so, at least in name and with absolute dedication, passion and fortitude. Although this has been hinted at throughout the study, I do believe that it bears repetition, as to me it illustrates the possibility that Marcus Aurelius was inherently not a very adventurous person and if given the choice he would have always taken the option of keeping to the status quo, thereby incurring very little upheaval in his life. This in essence was typically Stoic.

Reydams-Schils (2005:8) has a slightly different view on this “charge of conformism”. Reydams-Schils argues that Marcus Aurelius would naturally have approached decisions from the vantage point of what were “good”, as defined by Stoicism. In other words he would always have given someone the benefit of the doubt. Reydams-Schils (2005:8) explains that once one understands that this is the basis of a Stoic’s approach, one can understand that he would have tended to conform.

The study will now concentrate on the central issue explored here, namely Marcus Aurelius’ practical ethics as determined through the extent to which Marcus Aurelius’ actions with regards to familial and friendship relationships, slavery and the persecution of Christians were in line with his philosophy. It is hoped that this may contribute to a re-evaluation of his political career.

# CHAPTER 4: MARCUS AURELIUS IN ACTION

## AS THE GOOD PHILOSOPHER-EMPEROR

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to provide a reinvestigation of Marcus Aurelius' career, with specific reference to three spheres, namely familial relationships and friendships, slavery and the persecution of Christians. This provides the framework to serve as a basis for the investigation of factors that may have influenced his actions and style of government. In the investigation of these factors, a re-evaluation of his political career, based on some of the contradictions found in the image of him as leader, is attempted. This chapter then also contains not only an historical overview of his career as it pertains to the three focus areas, but it focuses entirely on his actions or cases where he neglected to act. In some instances certain scenarios reveal his intentions as opposed to his actions, in as much as this is possible to depict. I realise that in the last instance much must remain on the hypothetical level, but I believe that the lens used here casts a different light onto his political career.

As suggested earlier in the study, there exists the possibility that Marcus Aurelius would have had to have been very politically astute in order to have survived as Emperor for almost 20 years. This statement is supported in an argument by Wiedemann (1989:6) who notes that some of the contradictions found in Marcus Aurelius' image can be explained in terms of the period of Marcus Aurelius' rule, which represented the transition from the classical world to that of late antiquity according to modern perspective. Wiedemann explains his argument by stating that the Senate, court and aristocracy during this period came not only from the landed Latin-speaking elite of Italy, but from all over the Empire. The *Meditations* is indicative of this convergence of cultures, in that it reflects not only the traditions of the individual Greek city but also that of the Roman Republic that went before.

It was truly a time of transition and one can speculate that rules of political conduct had changed dramatically since the Roman Republic, due to this transformed landscape. I can only speculate on the uncertainty that this change must have brought to the inner psyche of Marcus Aurelius.

Together with the natural disasters and constant war that are highlighted in this chapter, he must have found himself in turmoil, but also having to adapt and adapt fast if he wanted to remain in power. He could not rely on the old rules to play the political game but rather in my view, had to carve out his own path by utilising everything he had learnt from his education and especially his philosophic education.

Keeping this in mind the following section 4.2 now deals with Marcus Aurelius' familial relationships and friendships. Section 4.3 deals with slavery and 4.4 with issues pertaining to the persecution of Christians.

## 4.2 Marcus Aurelius and his familial relationships and friendships

Gibbon<sup>33</sup> (in 1783) as quoted by Birley (1987:8) pays homage to Marcus Aurelius as: "severe to himself, indulgent to the imperfection of others, just and beneficent to all mankind". The study will attempt to demonstrate that as an apparently committed Stoic, Marcus Aurelius followed this mantra to the extreme. As McLynn (2009:91) observes: "Marcus, was never more a Stoic than when he endured the unendurable".

Marcus Aurelius seemed to have always gravitated towards doing "the right thing" towards others, while being heavily predisposed to the laws of Stoicism and Roman ethics and his own view of what was deemed morally correct. At the same time he must have felt enormous political pressure from friends, foes, family members and the Senate. Therefore the possibility must also be entertained that his relationships with certain individuals and his actions toward them were simply not truly altruistic. The notion must be entertained that in some cases Marcus Aurelius had to play the political game by either utilising a specific rhetoric or the pretence of ignorance in order to survive as Emperor, while keeping his focus on his own agenda, in keeping with his own ethics.

Gibbon is correct in his statement that although Marcus Aurelius was generous to others, simultaneously he was very strict on himself. I refer here to Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, which I consider and have shown to be filled with suggestions on how to live correctly and appropriately. By writing down these "ideas", Marcus Aurelius shows us how he self-criticised and strove towards self-improvement.

At this point I have to consider an argument by McLynn (2009:113) where he emphasises that Marcus Aurelius felt the need to promote the Stoic view of a communal society, looking at the general good of all (see *Meditations* i.16; iv.12; iii.4; vii.5), but McLynn also refers to the fact that as

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<sup>33</sup> Gibbon, E. 1776. *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, chapter 3.

emperor, Marcus Aurelius also had to enhance security, peace, trade and Roman glory. This was in essence the main purpose of an emperor.

Yet, McLynn argues that this in itself distances Marcus Aurelius from great leaders of the past, like Alexander the Great, Hannibal or Julius Caesar. McLynn argues that Marcus Aurelius, as autocrat, appears more like a modern thinker-leader here, such as Lenin, Mao and Hitler, regardless of the fact that they were all seen as absolute dictators. McLynn (2009:113) argues that Marcus Aurelius believed that in order to be a good leader, one had to travel through all the stages in the hierarchy of social being – man, adult, citizen, Roman, emperor - and that one had to master each of these.

These statements direct our attention to a quote from *Meditations* vi.30, as pointed out by Reydam-Schils (2005:1) and which I would suggest lies at the centre of Marcus Aurelius' political career, namely "Take care that you are not turned into a Caesar." Reydam-Schils argues here that Marcus Aurelius, as this quote demonstrates, is resisting his role as Caesar and struggles to recognise himself within his socio-political role. One sees that throughout the *Meditations* Marcus Aurelius clearly wanted to "progress and strengthen his resolve to do the right thing", as is also pointed out by Reydam-Schils (2005:1). Reydam-Schils (2012:437) also observes that it must have caused great effort from Marcus Aurelius not to identify himself fully with being an emperor. However, if one considers the assumption above, that he did not necessarily reconcile himself within the role of Caesar, then one has to consider Reydam-Schils' questions around the type of progress Marcus Aurelius had in mind and whether it was to bridge the gap between Stoic ideals and the ethos of the time.

Reydam-Schils (2005:1) argues importantly, that through the adoption of Stoic doctrine Romans, such as Marcus Aurelius, established a "model" whereby they placed themselves in the role of a facilitator between Stoic and traditional values. Through this "model" they successfully linked Stoic ideals with occurrences in everyday-life, creating a society that reflected both Stoic and Roman ideals. According to Reydam-Schils (2005:4) it is important to note that Roman Stoicism attempted to understand the "relationship between a human being's ruling principle and the divine principle that govern the universe as a whole". Reydam-Schils (2005:4) argues that for the Roman Stoic this wider community included not only humanity, but also the gods and the cosmos. Reydam-Schils (2012:437) states that Marcus Aurelius, similar to Seneca, Musonius Rufus and Epictetus challenges leadership, but adopts a low-authority. Reydam-Schils argues that this is due to Stoics believe in interiorising philosophy.

This brings me to the four relationship roles I would like to review here, namely Marcus Aurelius' relationships as son, brother, husband and father. His actions towards four individuals are examined:



his adoptive father, Antoninus Pius; his brother, Lucius Verus; his wife, Faustina; and his son, Commodus. Marcus Aurelius' actions in these roles were seemingly in contradiction to the image of the man of whom Mathew Arnold, in Birley (1987:8), said: "Besides him, history presents one or two other sovereigns eminent for their goodness, such as Saint Louis or Alfred" and "the morality of Marcus Aurelius acquires a special character".

As far as Marcus Aurelius' actions towards the four individuals mentioned in the previous paragraph are concerned, Farquharson (1968:265) argues that there are two bigger questions to be answered from a socio-political perspective. Firstly, why did Antoninus Pius leave his heritage both to Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus? These two men, the latter of whom numerous scholars believe was unfit as a ruler, seemingly inherited a peaceful empire, so why have two emperors? The second question is why Marcus Aurelius broke with the Roman tradition of adoption, by appointing his son Commodus as Emperor. Both these questions centre on the subject of succession. The first question highlights, as we shall see, the very pivotal role of Hadrian within the lives of the Antonines and specifically the positive or negative traits within Antoninus Pius' character. This must surely have played a role in Marcus Aurelius' formation, as Antoninus Pius was the main educator of Marcus Aurelius in governmental administration.

Consideration must also be given to whether Marcus Aurelius would even have been Emperor were it not for the emperor Hadrian's stipulation and one cannot ignore the political action of Hadrian around the unusual demand for the appointment of Lucius Verus as co-emperor with Marcus Aurelius. Again this influenced Marcus Aurelius' life. Reflecting on the second question, one has to contemplate Marcus Aurelius' almost obstinacy in the appointment of Commodus, whom history has shown to be an unworthy leader.

To Farquharson's two questions, I add two additional questions; namely why Marcus Aurelius turned a blind-eye to the alleged infidelities of his wife Faustina and why he seemingly tolerated the character flaws in both Antoninus Pius and Lucius Verus. Were the tolerance of those close to him based in Stoicism, did they aid him politically or alternatively, was he purely blind to their indiscretions?

#### **4.2.1 Antoninus Pius**

I start with Marcus Aurelius' relationship with his adopted father, Antoninus Pius. The relationship seemed to be one of devoted son to father and at first glance Marcus Aurelius seemingly protected Antoninus Pius' reputation with utter steadfastness, as can be seen in *Meditations* i.16. It has to be

taken into account that this praise might not have been as straightforward an example of admiration as it seems at first reading.

In this passage (*Meditations* i.16) one can clearly observe the seemingly great regard Marcus Aurelius bestows on Antoninus Pius, when he says that he learned from him “to be gentle” and “to be free from vain conceit with regard to worldly honours” and “to lend a ready ear to those who have anything to propose for the common benefit; never to be deflected from rewarding each person according to his deserts”. Marcus Aurelius also admires Antoninus Pius’ dedication to friendships as expressed in: “to hold to one’s friends, and never be fickle in one’s affections”; and he admires Pius’ “regard to people, not to court public favour by seeking to please at any price or pandering to the mob; but sobriety in all things, and firmness, and never a trace of vulgarity or lust for novelty”.

Marcus Aurelius also clearly praises Antoninus Pius for his good administration, illustrated in the lines: “his stewardship of its [the empire] resources;” “Discretion and moderation alike in the provision of shows, in carrying out public works” “Exact scrutiny in council” of the Empire and his attention to detail, even in his private life and finally his admiration is expressed when he says of Pius: “to show strength and endurance, and show restraint in either case, is the mark of a man who possesses a well-balanced and invincible character”. De Blois (2012:173) notes that Marcus Aurelius praised Antoninus Pius for his thorough examination of details, his guardianship over the Empire and his conservation of resources in reference to his good administration.

On the other side of the spectrum one can argue that Marcus Aurelius merely tolerated Antoninus Pius and that Pius in fact was not as exemplary as the picture painted in history; and that Marcus was possibly not as in awe of Antoninus Pius as the passage from the *Meditations* on the surface suggests. Scholars, such as Rutherford (1989:107) suggest that Marcus Aurelius’ praise of Antoninus Pius in *Meditations* i.16 is misleading. Rutherford’s argument deserves attention as it shows a different side to the moral judge, Marcus Aurelius. Rutherford suggests that the praise is very tactfully applied, pointing to a very politically adept side of Marcus Aurelius. Rutherford (1989:108) argues that if one examines the text closely, one sees that Marcus Aurelius not so much praises Antoninus Pius specifically, but rather uses him to pinpoint cleverly the characteristics that other emperors before Antoninus Pius had lacked, thereby criticising the previous emperors and suggesting that the passage is not really about Antoninus Pius’ virtues. An example can be found in *Meditations* iii.16.1 where he condemns Nero as a monster, “a creature of bestial impulses.”

Rutherford (1989:109) also argues that Marcus Aurelius condemns through comparison with Antoninus Pius, Trajan and Hadrian’s taste for young boys (*Meditations* i.16.2). He praises Antoninus

Pius for acting “according to ancestral custom” (*Meditations* i.16.6, as quoted by Rutherford 1989:109) and the “ability to keep and place a proper value on his friends” (*Meditations* i.16.2). Rutherford also highlights Marcus Aurelius’ praise of Antoninus Pius not being a sophist (*Meditations* i.16.4, vi.30.3) which McLynn (2009:43) too suggests is not so much an approval of Pius, but rather an indirect criticism of the emperor Hadrian, who apparently was a great supporter of the Sophists. In addition, McLynn (2009:73) points out that some scholars believe that behind Pius’ apparent affability there existed a great ego may also point towards additional criticism of Antoninus Pius’ personality. McLynn suggests that if one looks at the “Health” and “Well-being” mottoes that Antoninus Pius placed on his coins, he must have been someone who thought that he was enjoying luck in life and that he might have been somewhat smug in his longevity. McLynn goes on to argue that Antoninus Pius enjoyed showy titles and that the titles of the Emperor became more elaborate under his reign. McLynn (2009:73) then suggests that Marcus Aurelius’ elaborate praise of Antoninus Pius in *Meditations* i.16, is rather ironic, if we take the foregoing argument into consideration. McLynn (2009:94) points out that what Marcus Aurelius really thought of Antoninus Pius becomes a matter of speculation.

It also becomes pertinent to highlight McLynn’s (2009:94-95) argument around things that must have frustrated Marcus Aurelius, such as Antoninus Pius’ neglect of the army and his peace policy, which later possibly caused many military problems for Marcus Aurelius during his reign. The fact that Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus did not travel during the reign of Antoninus Pius had the effect that they never truly came to know the plight of the entire Empire. Antoninus Pius also never gave Marcus Aurelius the title of Augustus and he had no personal cabinet under Pius, did not go on any missions and did not sign official letters (see *Meditations* vi.30). In addition, McLynn (2009:95) suggests that Antoninus Pius did not ease the way for Marcus Aurelius, but was controlling and micromanaging. Another irony which McLynn (2009:175) highlights is that in the end Marcus Aurelius ran a more detailed, considerate, sensitive and more pro-Hellenic administration than Antoninus Pius.

These arguments by Rutherford and McLynn, then provide a different perspective on the specific passage of *Meditations* i.16 and, as indicated, question Marcus Aurelius’ true feelings towards Antoninus Pius. It is also interesting to note that there exists a debate amongst scholars who question widely whether Hadrian truly wanted Marcus Aurelius as successor. The question arises whether it was rather Antoninus Pius who saw Marcus Aurelius as his successor, as implied by Dio *RH* and referenced by Grant (1996:26), who also suggests that this has undoubtedly been disputed,

due to Hadrian's eagerness to regulate the imperial succession and Dio's insistence of Hadrian's desire to have Marcus Aurelius as successor.

I do not find the objections by the different scholars truly convincing if one considers the length of praise in *Meditations* i.16. In addition one may take into account Brunt's (2013:294) argument that this praise has value for two reasons. Firstly it provides us with an unique intimate portrait of a Roman emperor, through the eyes of a colleague [Marcus] who had worked closely with him for a number of years. And secondly, if we leave out a couple of short traits and anecdotes, it corresponds greatly with the conventional view of a good emperor, which the study explored in section 2.2.4.

However, one cannot consider this relationship without firstly and possibly more importantly, looking back in history to the time of Hadrian's. Hadrian, as indicated, on the face of it played a pivotal role in the destiny of the Antonines through his desire to influence succession. One also has to consider the notion that Hadrian's succession plans basically catapulted Marcus Aurelius into the role of Emperor. *HA Marcus* iv.5-iv.6 as quoted by Birley (1987:40-41) suggests that in a number of ways young Marcus Aurelius had lived under the shadow of Hadrian. This is an interesting observation, since Hadrian features as a somewhat peripheral figure throughout Marcus Aurelius' childhood and into his teenage years. What is obvious from this historical review is the fact that Hadrian's influence through his plans for succession, clearly played a major role in the future of Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus.

Hadrian's influence on the Antonines' and specifically Marcus Aurelius' future started when Marcus was little, as can be seen in section 2.2 of the study. However, the full drama of Hadrian's future influence started when Hadrian, at the age of 56 in 132 CE, earnestly started thinking about his successors. In 134 CE he made his brother-in-law, the 90 year old Severianus, consul for the third time (Birley 1987:41). This probably created the impression that Severianus was considered his successor.

One learns from *HA Hadrian* xxiii.1-3, 7-9 and xv.8, xxv.8 and Dio *RH* lxix.17.1-3 as quoted by Birley (1987:41-42), that Hadrian's in the beginning did consider Severianus or his grandson, Pedanius Fuscus Salinator as possible successors. However, after Hadrian suffered a haemorrhage at Tivoli in 136 CE, he started suspecting Severianus of collusion and decided to rather nominate Ceionius Commodus, the father of Lucius Verus as successor. This resulted in both Severianus and his grandson's forced suicide, a not unusual occurrence during this period of Hadrian's rule, since, at this stage he sometimes openly killed a number of his enemies.

According to *HA Marcus* iv.5, iv.6, as quoted by McLynn (2009:24) after Severianus' suicide, Hadrian astutely arranged the engagement of Marcus Aurelius to Ceionia Fabia, a daughter of Ceionius Commodus. *HA Marcus* iv.5, iv.6 as quoted by McLynn (2009:25) states that through this union, Hadrian wanted to "combine two of the most powerful *gentes* in Rome – one Spanish and one Italian, thereby advancing his own long-term plans for succession." McLynn (2009:35-36) argues that Hadrian was obsessed by his desire to arrange the imperial succession according to his own wishes and stopped at nothing and with no-one to achieve his desires. Marcus Aurelius happened to be in the position of being the key link in the union of the *gens* Ceonius and the *gens* Annius.

Nevertheless, Ceionius went on to receive the name Lucius Aelius Caesar and returned to Rome, only to fall ill and die, all on the same day (see Birley 1987:43). Birley (1987:46) quotes Dio *RH* lxi.20.1-5 which states that in 136 CE Hadrian, though ill, made a short speech at an urgent meeting of the most senior senators, as reported by Dio. In the speech he formally announced his succession plan and commended Antoninus Pius as his ultimate successor. Dio's version of the speech, as quoted by Birley 1987:46, reads as follows:

Nature has not permitted me to have a son, my friends, but you have made it possible through law. There is this difference between the two sorts of son: a son that one has begotten turns out to be whatever sort of man heaven pleases; an adopted son is one that a man takes to himself as the result of deliberate choice. A son that is born may be mentally defective or a cripple. One that is chosen will certainly be of sound body and mind. For this reason I formerly selected Lucius [Ceionius Commodus] from all others – a person such as I could never have expected any son of mine to have become. But since heaven has taken him from me, I have found an Emperor for you in his place the man I now give to you, one who is noble, mild, tractable and prudent, who is not young enough to do anything rash or old enough to be neglectful, one who has been brought up according to the laws and who has exercised authority in accordance with our ancestral customs, so that he is not ignorant of any matters which concern the exercise of imperial power but can deal with them all well. I am speaking of Aurelius Antoninus [Antoninus Pius] here. I know that he is not the least inclined to be involved in affairs and is far from desiring such power, but still I do not think that he will deliberately disregard either me or you, but will accept the rule even against his will.

The speech clearly demonstrates the contrast between Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius' thoughts on the practice of adoption. While Hadrian sees a clear risk in not adopting a successor in his statement "a son that one has begotten turns out to be whatever sort of man heaven pleases", one sees

Marcus Aurelius apparently not even considering not letting Commodus succeed him. Although as the study shows later, Marcus Aurelius did attempt to safeguard Commodus' succession by appointing older mentors to assist Commodus (see footnote 38). In addition McLynn (2010:38) quotes Dio *RH* which suggests that Hadrian announced his desire for Antoninus Pius to adopt both Lucius Verus and Marcus Aurelius<sup>34</sup>; McLynn suggests further that Dio also believed that Hadrian chose Marcus Aurelius because of his ancestry<sup>35</sup>.

Related to this argument and returning to the debate on whether Antoninus Pius was truly the model man and leader that Marcus Aurelius writes about in *Meditations* i.16, McLynn (2009:38) argues that Hadrian had specifically chosen Antoninus Pius as his successor, because of his lack of ambition, his maturity, his firm character and lack of enemies. This evidence leads me to suggest that there is a different perspective to Antoninus Pius' character, namely that he was firstly not a political threat and that he in fact was seen by Hadrian to be mild and tractable of character. This also brings into doubt Marcus Aurelius' intentions with praising Antoninus Pius, since he surely was astute enough to register Hadrian's judgements.

According to the timeline in Birley (1987:44), Marcus Aurelius' engagement to Ceionia Fabia was annulled after the death of Hadrian when Antoninus Pius succeeded Hadrian as emperor. Through Hadrian's wish, Antoninus Pius now adopted both the sons of Commodus, Lucius Verus and Marcus Aurelius. Marcus Aurelius now became an heir apparent at the young age of 17.

McLynn (2009:75) argues that Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius had a friendly understanding. Antoninus Pius insisted that Marcus Aurelius live in the imperial palace and be recognised by the court, with full honours. Marcus objected, but Antoninus Pius pointed out that the people would not understand that Marcus' unwillingness to reside in the imperial palace was due to philosophy (at this stage Marcus Aurelius had adopted a number of the characteristics of a philosopher), as they would not understand philosophical ways and rather label him as an unworthy heir. In *Meditations* i.17.3, Marcus Aurelius thanks Antoninus Pius for teaching him that even in court, one could live without unnecessary material things, such as beautiful clothes, décor or artworks. I would suggest that in this we see Marcus Aurelius starting to grow into his role as philosopher-emperor.

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<sup>34</sup> "Since he had no male offspring, Hadrian adopted for him [Antoninus Pius] Commodus' son, Commodus [Lucius Verus], and, in addition to him, Marcus Annus Verus [Marcus Aurelius]; for he wished to appoint those who were afterwards to be Emperors for as great a time period as possible. This Marcus Annus, earlier named Catilius, was a grandson of Annus Verus who had been consul thrice and prefect of the city. And though Hadrian kept Verus [Marcus Aurelius] on account of kinship and his age and because he was already giving indication of exceptional strength of character..." and that "Hadrian adopted him chiefly for this reason" (Dio *RH* lxi:21.1-2).

<sup>35</sup> McLynn (2009:13-14) writes that Marcus Aurelius' family was the influential and politically prominent Annus *gens* related to Hadrian. McLynn argues that since money, next to kinship, determined one's future within the Roman Empire, Marcus Aurelius was seemingly fated for greatness.

According to Hadot (1998:6), Marcus Aurelius' correspondence with Fronto in his late teens gives us a picture of the simple life the family and Marcus led at Antoninus' court. Together they worked during the grape harvest and Marcus enjoyed exercise, especially hunting, which he apparently practiced without reservations. Their home life was modest, with no luxury meals or heating. Evidence of this life is found in a letter from Marcus Aurelius to Fronto around 140-143 CE, as quoted by Hadot (1998:6):

But what, you ask, was the story? When my father arrived home from the vineyards I climbed onto my horse, as usual, and set off along the road, and had ridden some little way when, right there in the road, I came upon a flock of sheep all huddled together in the way that they do when there is little space; with them there were four dogs and two shepherds, but that was all. Then one shepherd said to the other, on seeing a crowd of horsemen coming, 'Watch out for those riders there, they're just the kind to do a lot of plundering'. On hearing this, I dug my spurs into my horse and galloped right in among the sheep. Panic stricken the sheep scattered, running off this way and that, bleating and blundering around. A shepherd hurled his crook at us, and it fell on the man who was riding behind me. We cleared right off. And so that's how the man who was worried about losing his sheep came to lose his crook. Do you think I have made this up? Every word of it is true; and I could indeed write more to you about it if the messenger were not summoning me to my bath. Goodbye, my sweetest master, most noble and exceptional of men, my joy, delight, and pleasure (Hard 2011:129; Marcus to Fronto AD 139-161 (0.34; i.150-3)).

Hadot (1998:6) believes we are catching Marcus Aurelius here in an act of silliness and points out that Marcus' reactions here are remarkably different from the philosopher-emperor we get to know later in his life, one who is always dutiful and just. This also demonstrates the general ethos of the time and instantiates the typical view of the upper classes over those from poorer backgrounds.

Grant (1996:2,25) argues that the reign of Antoninus Pius exemplified peace and effective governing and Birley (1987:103) says that as future emperor, Marcus Aurelius during this time had to learn the business of government, which was made possible through Antoninus Pius' mentorship. As Birley (1987:103-104) points out, it is notable that Antoninus Pius "never had any experience abroad" and it is clear that at this stage, Antoninus Pius deemed it unnecessary for Marcus Aurelius to gain this experience. Birley (1987:86,89,103) points out that Marcus Aurelius imitated Antoninus Pius' dedication to his position, and moved through the *cursus honorum* with accelerated promotion, continuing to fulfil the role of consul in 140, 145 and 161 CE. In 145 CE Marcus married Faustina the younger, his cousin and daughter of Antoninus Pius, tying him even more closely to the latter.

McLynn (2009:84) points out that before Antoninus Pius' adoption of Marcus Aurelius he was already his uncle through his marriage to Marcus' aunt on his father's side. So McLynn asks why he would want to bind Marcus even closer to him, unless he had ulterior motives. I would like to argue that these ulterior motives were part of politics on behalf of Antoninus Pius, in that Pius realised that Hadrian had meant for Pius to simply be an interim measure until Marcus Aurelius could become emperor. It may suggest that Pius felt threatened and possibly even worried for his life, since assassination of political opposition was common. As McLynn (2009:77) argues, later in life Antoninus Pius' longevity must have been frustrating for Marcus Aurelius and would have tested both his patience and moral fibre. McLynn continues to speculate that if previous emperors had been in a similar situation they would certainly have turned to assassination or poisoning of Antoninus Pius.

Nevertheless, Faustina bore Marcus Aurelius at least 14 children in 23 years, with two sets of twins, suggesting a happy marriage. However, as the study will show, their relationship was seemingly far more complex than this suggests.

In 147 CE Marcus Aurelius received the powers of *imperium* and *tribunicia potestas*, pointing to him as superior authority outside of Rome. With his consulship in 140 CE and onwards, coinage was issued in his name, as son of the emperor (*Pii filius*) (Grant 1996:24-25).

Grant argues that due to the closeness in family ties, Marcus Aurelius could be seen as Antoninus Pius' hereditary successor and he then also took Antoninus Pius' family name. Marcus Aurelius and Antoninus Pius worked together for 23 years and apparently only spent two nights apart (Grant 1996:24). Grant argues that this truly shows the dedication Marcus Aurelius had for either or both his adopted father, Antoninus Pius and/or his profession. On March 7, 161 CE, Antoninus Pius passed away.

It is clear that there exist different views on the relationship between Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius. What the true situation was can only be speculated on. What is important is that one can see from the study that Marcus Aurelius' actions towards Antoninus Pius had seemingly been honourable. If Marcus Aurelius felt any disloyalty or apprehension towards Antoninus Pius, it was concealed in the subtext again would imply a very politically adept Marcus Aurelius. So, if we consider Brunt's previous argument together with McLynn and Grant's views on Antoninus Pius' reign, then one has to consider that Brunt could be correct and that Marcus Aurelius had possibly been indoctrinated to a certain degree through Antoninus Pius' education as well as his example of an emperor that kept the status quo. However, as McLynn argues, it seems as if Marcus Aurelius



had possibly seen through this side of Antoninus Pius and McLynn suspects that Marcus Aurelius may have mistrusted Pius, thinking that he had ulterior motives.

McLynn believes that, if this was the case, then Marcus Aurelius played a clever political game of waiting. Marcus Aurelius praised Antoninus Pius and apparently obeyed him openly, but waited for his death to rule in the way he truly wanted. I refuse to believe that Marcus Aurelius was as naïve as Brunt suggests and am more inclined to lean towards McLynn's argument. In the absence of concrete evidence to the fact, I can only speculate that in the beginning Marcus Aurelius might have given Antoninus Pius the benefit of the doubt but that later on he did become frustrated with the longevity of Antoninus Pius. Whatever the circumstances, Marcus Aurelius' patience within this situation is truly admirable and in my mind serves to portray the true character of the philosopher-emperor.

However, Rutherford (1989:114) argues that if one examines Marcus Aurelius' praise of Antoninus Pius in *Meditations* one will also find it very restricted, not elaborating too much on any virtue. What is clear, as discussed by Rees (1961:ix), is that Marcus Aurelius' picture of Antoninus Pius as his adopted father in *Meditations* i.16 is one of directness of character and dutifulness. Although Antoninus Pius was less of a visionary than Hadrian, Marcus Aurelius praised his memory and throughout the ages since then, his character has been judged similarly.

#### **4.2.2 Lucius Verus**

In the following paragraphs Marcus Aurelius' relationship with Lucius Verus and the circumstances that led to their succession and co-reign are discussed.

Rees (1961:x) considers certain actions by Marcus Aurelius as unique within the imperial constitution, in that no emperor before him had taken similar actions; these actions did however, set a precedent to be repeated again in future reigns of the Empire. Grant (1996:27) points out that upon Marcus Aurelius' succession, he immediately appointed Lucius Verus co-Emperor, "with a thoroughness that had never been seen before", thereby consenting to Hadrian's succession plans. Farquharson (1968:265-266) points out that Marcus also betrothed his daughter Lucilla to Lucius Verus, all of this ensuring that the transfer of power went smoothly.

In these actions of Marcus Aurelius, one has to take into account an argument by McLynn (2009:120) who points out that the notion of joint ruling was entirely that of Marcus Aurelius; for McLynn maintains that Antoninus Pius had not mentioned joint emperorship between Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus on his death bed. McLynn (2009:122) argues that Antoninus Pius had in fact marginalised Lucius Verus and that Verus never received the same imperial favour as Marcus

Aurelius had. This is a very interesting notion as again it points to a very astute political player in Marcus Aurelius. By appointing Lucius Verus as co-emperor could Marcus Aurelius have thought that it placed him in a stronger political position?

This becomes clearer when one considers an argument by Grant (1996:27) who reasons that there is evidence that earlier on in the Empire, several earlier rulers had contemplated joint succession, but definitely not on the scale of Marcus Aurelius. Grant speculates that Marcus Aurelius' reasons for these decisive steps could be threefold; he may have thought it important to fulfil the wishes of his predecessors; as seen in *Meditations* i.x it is possible that Marcus Aurelius truly did like Lucius Verus; or Marcus Aurelius believed that two men were needed to rule successfully the enormous Roman Empire. McLynn (2009:120-121) agrees with Grant on the first point, but argues that the more likely situation was that Marcus Aurelius wanted to avert a coup by the Ceionius clan, to whom Lucius Verus belonged. In other words this could have been pure statesmanship. Farquharson (1968:265-266) makes the same argument stating that since Hadrian had originally nominated Lucius' father as successor, but upon his early death, Antoninus Pius had become emperor, Marcus Aurelius possibly foresaw civil uprising if he ignored the "claim" Lucius had upon the throne.

Birley (1987:116) emphasises that it is clear that Marcus Aurelius was not inclined to public life, but his Stoic principles and his training of 23 years had made his duty plain. Birley also argues that Marcus Aurelius knew that the Empire needed a strong hand and may have believed that a partner could lighten the task. In addition Birley maintains that Marcus Aurelius knew he had to fulfil Hadrian's wish. So, Lucius Verus became co-emperor.

This action of Marcus Aurelius resulted in him adopting a policy, familiar in later centuries, of instituting two emperors, which according to Farquharson (1968:266) was not a complete failure. McLynn (2009:120) argues that in later centuries co-reign became commonplace but within the second century CE it was an innovation.

Rees (1961:x) states that Lucius Verus, upon succession, received equal standing to Marcus Aurelius in the supreme title of Augustus. However, he argues that Marcus Aurelius was clearly the senior partner. Marcus Aurelius, in comparison to Lucius Verus had been a consul on more occasions and was also *Pontifex Maximus*, while Verus was only *Pontifex* as also pointed out by Birley (1987:117). In addition, Marcus Aurelius had worked under Antoninus Pius for fourteen years and was ten years

older. It seems as if Lucius Verus' appointment had been purely a political play by Hadrian, executed from his grave, in order to appease the Ceionius gens, to which Lucius Verus belonged<sup>36</sup>.

One finds negative, but also contradictory judgments of Lucius Verus' character and actions throughout scholarship. Some agree that Lucius Verus enjoyed the high life, entertainment, lavish living and love of luxury, while others talk about his caring attitude and love of culture (see McLynn 2009: 123-124). Rees (1961:x) argues that Lucius Verus didn't have the energy needed to fulfil his position adequately. However, Farquharson (1968:265-266) points out that in *Meditations* i.17.4 and in the letters between Marcus Aurelius and Fronto, one finds references to Lucius Verus' warm, but superficial temperament and the fact that Marcus regarded him as loyal.

Grant (1996:27-28) says that if one considers Lucius Verus' busts one can see that he was very handsome, with curly and allegedly golden hair; Romans believed that this was a positive sign from the gods. In *HA Verus* x.6-8 as quoted by Grant (1996:28) one finds a description of Lucius Verus, which demonstrates the widespread perception of him<sup>37</sup>. The quote is suggestive of Lucius Verus' enjoyment of the high life. One can then ask the question, why did Marcus Aurelius, who is always associated with austerity, paint such a good picture of Lucius Verus in *Meditations* i.17<sup>38</sup>?

It seems that there might have been some justification for Marcus Aurelius' loyalty. Grant (1996:29) argues that Lucius Verus had some unprincipled friends, Coedus, Eclectus, Agablitus and Pergamus. Grant defends Lucius Verus when he argues that criticism of these men by historians could account for some of the criticism of Lucius Verus' character. Grant disputes arguments that Lucius Verus plotted against Marcus Aurelius and states that Verus pushed Marcus Aurelius to give Caesarships to his own sons and that he accepted Marcus Aurelius' appointment of staff members to his household, when he was in the East.

Nevertheless, upon ascension the two emperors were almost immediately catapulted into war (Goodman 1997:73). The Parthians seized Armenia and McLynn (2009:139) writes that Lucius Verus was sent to command the legions, around 161-162 CE.

McLynn (2009:142-143) maintains that Marcus Aurelius sent with Lucius Verus the best equipment, generals and men. Lucius Verus however delayed and only departed for the East in the summer of 162 CE, together with an entire entourage. On his way to the East they hunted and revelled. At

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<sup>36</sup> Lucius Verus' father was Lucius Aelius Caesar (Ceionius Commodus), who was originally nominated by Hadrian as his successor (Farquharson 1968:265-266).

<sup>37</sup> "he was very keen on gambling, and his way of life was always extravagant. He was a voluptuary and excessive in his pleasures, and very suited, within proper limits, to all sports, games and jesting."

<sup>38</sup> "To have had such a brother who by his character was able to stimulate me to cultivate my own nature, and yet at the same time heartened me by his respect and affection..."

Canusium, Lucius Verus became ill, forcing Marcus Aurelius to join him, until his recovery. Lucius Verus continued his entertaining journey to the East, eventually reaching Antioch. McLynn (2009:156) argues that Lucius Verus and his entourage must have been a continuous worry for Marcus Aurelius. It is unlikely that Marcus had not noticed Lucius Verus' lack of urgency during this crisis. However, there is also no evidence of Marcus speaking ill of his brother with regards to this issue.

Dio *RH* lxxi.1.3 as quoted by McLynn (2009:139) thought the reason that Verus was sent, was purely because "he was physically robust and younger than Marcus, and better suited to military activity", but McLynn (2009:139), interestingly, reasons that Marcus Aurelius had made a shrewd decision here. By sending Lucius Verus to Parthia, he ensured that the imperial Principate did not lose face any further, as he removed Lucius Verus' sexual excesses from the views of the Roman people. If this is true, then Marcus Aurelius made a very clever decision in sending Lucius Verus, as it distanced him from Lucius Verus and also at the same time removed Verus from the public eye.

Lucius Verus did manage victory in 166 CE and in the same year Marcus Aurelius was called to the Danube frontier, which was threatened by German tribes (Goodman 1997:73). McLynn (2009:139-140) argues that in this case Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus' educational shortcomings under Antoninus Pius are emphasised, namely their ignorance of anything abroad and their lack of military training. In 167 CE the Germans managed to push towards northern Italy and Marcus Aurelius had to raise two new legions in order to halt their progress (Goodman 1997:73-74). In 169 CE Marcus Aurelius had to auction off imperial property in order to fund the campaign. This was also the year that Lucius Verus died, presumably from natural causes (Goodman 1997:74). Upon Lucius Verus' death Marcus Aurelius continued to rule alone (Rees 1961:x), but the irony is that Marcus Aurelius would never truly leave the battlefield during his reign. Here one sees a man who was never trained in anything military and who yearned for the life of a philosopher, yet, spent most of his life on the battlefield. This must have tested both his inner and external strength to the maximum and was definitely a contributing factor to his character development within later life, to that of a more serious individual.

Upon Lucius Verus' death, speculation was rife, since there existed a belief within the cultural milieu at this stage, in which it was impossible, as McLynn (2009:340) states, to imagine that an important man such as Lucius Verus could die from natural causes. McLynn (2009:341) maintains that upon Lucius Verus' death, Marcus Aurelius must have felt that he could now govern in his own way without consultation to an inferior intellect (this is the view propagated in *HA Marcus* xv.6). In addition Marcus Aurelius now could get rid of some of the titles that Verus had insisted apparently

in sharing with him, *Medicus* as an example. McLynn continues to say that Marcus Aurelius also now let it be known that he had developed the strategy that had seen victory over Parthia, and not Lucius Verus. This argument by McLynn suggests to me that Marcus Aurelius was again very astute. It is possible to speculate that by endearing himself to the people who so admired military progress in a leader and negating his obvious lack of military training, he positioned himself as a formidable strategic leader.

When all these arguments are weighed up it is possible to come to the conclusion that Marcus Aurelius once again played a masterful and patient politician. Marcus Aurelius showed no animosity to Lucius Verus, but rather utilised him where possible and endured his extravagances, but kept his focus on what he wanted to achieve as Emperor.

#### **4.2.3 Commodus**

Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus' strange co-emperorship was not the only anomaly during Marcus Aurelius' reign. As hinted at before, and according to Rees (1961:x) Marcus' rejection of adoption as principle of succession was another anomaly, so in relation to the subject of successions and adoption one also witnesses the irregularities within Marcus Aurelius' relationship with his son Commodus.

Rees (1961:x) argues that since the rule of Augustus, adoption was a Roman principle of succession. Yet as history shows Marcus Aurelius although also adopted, at the end of his life chose to rule together with his own son, Commodus, instead of adopting a successor outside of his bloodline, worthy of the title. This decision by Marcus Aurelius resulted in 12 years of oppression by the Emperor Commodus. One could argue though that this 'principle of adoption' was enforced by circumstances, and became practice purely because no emperor before Marcus had had a son of blood to succeed him and in fact Marcus Aurelius was the first emperor in a long line to have a son of his own blood, who could succeed him. However the fact that Marcus had a son in Commodus, still did not prohibit Marcus Aurelius from adopting another more worthy heir.

Grant (1996:62) argues that there has been a lot said about the good choices that the previous three emperors, Pius, Hadrian and Trajan had made through the act of adoption, but one must take into account that none of the three had any surviving sons, whereas Marcus had Commodus. Grant argues that for Romans during this period, the idea of hereditary dynastic succession was commonplace and that it is therefore not necessary to try and defend Marcus Aurelius' decision. Rees (1961:x) points out how this specific action by Marcus Aurelius has been the subject of much conjecture and also criticism in scholarship. Although this decision has triggered yet further

condemnation of the imperial position, it also resulted in the questioning of Marcus Aurelius' judgement. How could a virtuous person and good judge of the character of men, favour Lucius Verus, Commodus and Faustina? Or was it simply, as Peachin (2006:135) argues, that in the case of Commodus and Marcus Aurelius family came first?

Grant (1996:63) argues that the appointment of Commodus might have been inevitable and I agree, since Grant's statement leads me to conclude that Marcus Aurelius was clearly aware of his son's faults, but thought that asking his council to oversee Commodus' reign upon his death, would assist him in becoming a great leader. One sees this depicted in *RH* i.4.1–i.4.7<sup>39</sup> who portrays Marcus Aurelius, close to death, worrying that Commodus would not be able to cope with the power and responsibility of being an Emperor.

At age 19, Commodus took over power after the death of Marcus Aurelius. He had little of the imperial training that his father had undergone under Antoninus Pius and within the 12 years of his rule until his assassination in 192 CE, he restored in Rome the worst of Gaius and Nero (Goodman 1997:75).<sup>40</sup>

Grant (1996:3), however, argues that Commodus' actions might not have been as disastrous as first thought. Grant singles out two incidents during Commodus' reign as illustration: the first being the abandonment of the incorporation of Germany into the Roman Empire<sup>41</sup>. Commodus has been

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<sup>39</sup> "With a heavy heart because of these worries, Marcus Aurelius summoned his advisers and the relatives that were with him and made his son stand beside him. When everyone was assembled and quiet he raised himself up from his sick-bed and began a speech, saying: 'I am not surprised that you are sad to see me lying here in this state. It is normal for men to feel pity when misfortune strikes their own family. If the suffering takes place before their eyes, it excites even more sorrow. But I think that there is something even more than that in your feelings for me. My own emotions towards you make me reasonably confident there is a return of goodwill. Now is the right time for me to see that the honours and effort I expended on you for so long were not misplaced. And it is a good time for you to show your gratitude by proving you have not forgotten the benefits you received. Here is my son, whom you yourselves brought up, who has just reached the age of adolescence and stand in need of guides through the tempest and storm of life. There is a danger that he will be carried away and dashed against the rocks of evil habits because he has an imperfect experience of what to do. You who are many must be fathers to him in place of me alone. Take care of him and give him sound advice. Money is not enough to compensate for the licence of a tyrant and a bodyguard is not sufficient protection for a ruler unless he has the good will of his subjects as well. The rulers who inspired the hearts of their subjects with love by their goodness and not fear by their cruelty were the ones who lived out the full length of their reigns free from danger. It is not people that are forced into slavery but those who are persuaded to obey that regularly behave without suspicion or any pretence of flattery – and they are treated in the same way. They do not rebel unless driven to those lengths by violent, arrogant treatment. It is difficult to regulate and put a limit to one's desires if power is at one's disposal. Therefore you must give my son this sort of advice and remind him of what he is hearing now. In this way you will provide yourselves and everyone else with an excellent Emperor, and you will be showing your gratitude to my memory in the best of all ways. Indeed, it is the only way that you can keep my memory alive forever.' He lived for another day and a night before he died."

<sup>40</sup> Grant (1996:4) views Commodus' reign as the beginning of the end of the Roman Empire.

<sup>41</sup> During ancient times Rome made three attempts to incorporate Germany into the Roman Empire, thereby securing a shorter Elbe-Danube frontier. Augustus made the first attempt, which failed in AD 9, when Verus was ambushed by Arminius; the second came from Germanicus, who barely started when he was recalled by his uncle Tiberius; the third came from Marcus Aurelius himself. The plan being to approach from regions now occupied by the Czech Republic and Slovakia, but when Marcus Aurelius died, Commodus abandoned the plan immediately and returned to Rome, on the advice of a Greek advisor (Grant 1996:3).

fiercely criticised for this decision, but Grant argues that although it may have been advantageous for Germany to form part of the Roman Empire, one has to ask the question whether Rome would have been able to afford such a huge military expense. Further, as Grant asks, could they have raised enough men for the campaign? If the cost and the question around capacity was what prevented Commodus from incorporating Germany, then I concur with Grant's judgement that this decision by Commodus may in fact have been quite astute.

The second incident Grant discusses is Commodus' attitude towards Roman religion. Through the investigation of Commodus' coinage, Grant (1996:63) points out that his religious slogans are very different from coinage during previous reigns and that there is a tendency towards the monotheistic. Grant argues that although Commodus was a new type of autocrat, which was also portrayed on his coins, he seemed to veer towards depicting a more monotheistic approach as opposed to the traditional Roman religion. Grant (1996:3) believes that the answers lie in the later centuries' shift to Christianity, which found full imperial expression less than a century and a half after Commodus' death. So from this I conclude that one can possibly argue that Commodus' choices were perhaps not as erroneous as at first depicted and although Commodus is without doubt depicted as a despot throughout history and scholarship, one can also argue that Marcus Aurelius' actions here could, as Grant indicated, have been defensible.

More valuable perspectives are provided by an argument by Grant (1996:62), which points to the fact that, although there were very strong alternative candidates, (the most prominent being Marcus Aurelius' son-in-law, Tiberius Claudius Pompeianus) adoption of these candidates would not have been unproblematic. Grant points out that Tiberius as choice would probably have ended in civil war, as he was not the favourite of the people or the Senate.

#### **4.2.4 Faustina**

The other critique against Marcus Aurelius was the partiality he showed towards his wife, Faustina (see *Meditations* i.17<sup>42</sup>), especially with reference to the Avidius Cassius rebellion detailed below. Marcus Aurelius never displayed any doubt as to her fidelity, but later generations despised her for her infidelity. He also seems to have mourned her deeply after her death.

A rebellion led by Gaius Avidius Cassius, broke out in 175 CE in Syria (Grant 1996:49). Birley (1987:184) believes that Marcus Aurelius was caught completely unawares. He received word of the revolt from the loyal Martius Verus, the governor of Cappadocia. Birley (1987:184-189) discusses the full incident which, due to miscommunication, led to Avidius Cassius' tragic assassination and

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<sup>42</sup> "that my wife is such as she is, so obedient, so affectionate, so straightforward"

Commodus being proclaimed heir-apparent. According to Rees (1961:x), Avidius Cassius was a prominent soldier and administrator. As Syrian, he was regarded highly, explaining why the Syrians rallied to his support. What is important here is Dio *RH* lxxii.22.2-3 and lxxii.23.1-3 as quoted by Birley (1987:184) which blames Faustina for the rebellion. This seems to be the accepted version, in that she deceived Avidius Cassius and he committed a grave mistake by believing her. Faustina, seeing that her husband was ill, became scared that Marcus Aurelius would die and leave her in an unfavourable position, with the throne going to another. She realised that Commodus was still too young to reign and did not want to lose her position as Emperor's wife. She therefore, secretly, convinced Avidius Cassius to prepare, so that he might marry her and in addition also attain the imperial power, (Birley 1987:184).

Grant (1996:51–52) highlights Marcus Aurelius' generosity at the end of the debacle. Directly after the revolt, Avidius Cassius' son, a lawyer from Alexandria and another senior official were killed, but soon afterwards the Emperor seemed to have calmed down and treated the other supporters with restraint. Marcus Aurelius also refused to view Avidius Cassius' severed head and ensured that he received a proper burial; he went even further, burning any possible treasonable letters without reading them. He did, however, banish Avidius' other sons and exiled the prefect of Egypt. Grant (1996:51-52) argues that through these actions and by not referring any additional matters to the courts, Marcus Aurelius ensured the end of any possible witch hunt of Avidius Cassius' followers, which might have included Faustina. Marcus Aurelius did not, however, conceal his disappointment in the cities of Antioch and Alexandria, who had supported Cassius. In addition he made a ruling that in future no one was allowed to govern the province that he, Marcus Aurelius had originated from. Although the accounts we have of the event place Marcus Aurelius mostly in a favourable light, Grant believes that directly after the event he did not act as favourably, but this cannot be proven. According to Grant (1996:52) however, Dio's suspicion of Faustina, has never been confirmed or denied. One of the facts in dispute is whether Faustina could have thought Marcus unwell enough, to have asked Avidius Cassius to interfere.

It is important to note here that according to Birley (1987:185) the ancient sources, namely Cassius Dio and the biographer must have been young men during the event and this must provide some credence to the anti-Faustina version. However it is also evident that no one could have known the absolute truth about this event.

According to Birley (1987:185), Marcus Aurelius was ill during this period and this must have been well-known to Faustina since she was with him at the time. Commodus was at this stage not yet 13 and was in Rome (see *Dio* lxxi.1.2; lxxi.6.3-4; lxxi.24.4; lxxi.36.2-3). It is true that if Marcus Aurelius



had died at this stage, Commodus would have been too young to take over control and someone else would have needed to step in. The likely candidate would have been Marcus Aurelius' son-in-law, Tiberius Claudius Pompeianus, who had already been consul twice. But according to Birley (1987:185), Faustina and Lucilla (Marcus Aurelius' daughter) were hostile towards Pompeianus and Avidius Cassius would have been their only option.

So, if Birley (1987:185) is correct, it is possible that Faustina could have instigated the entire rebellion, out of fear for her own future. But, as Grant (1996:45) argues Marcus Aurelius not only emphasised his debt to Faustina for the empire, as she was the daughter of Antoninus Pius, but he also wrote that he believed in her and loved her: "that my wife is such as she is, so obedient, so affectionate, so straightforward" (*Meditations* i.17).

Therefore whatever the truth about their relationship, Marcus Aurelius protected and stayed faithful to her memory even after her death, shortly after the revolt of Avidius Cassius. Birley (1987:77) reports that upon Faustina's death in November 140 CE, Marcus Aurelius honoured her with a state funeral, she was deified and a temple built for her above the Forum. Before and after Faustina's death, the coins issued focused on the good relations between her and Marcus Aurelius. Reydam-Schils (2005:170) highlights the fact that Marcus Aurelius took a concubine after Faustina's death. Reydam-Schils suggests that there are strong indications that Marcus did this in order to prevent pressure from his previous fiancé before his marriage to Faustina. This points to Marcus Aurelius not being prepared to be manipulated into decisions.

#### **4.2.5 Some concluding remarks**

In reviewing all the evidence and speculations around Marcus Aurelius' relationships, I have to then reason that McLynn's (2009:403-404) argument, that Marcus Aurelius was naïve when it came to relationships is quite plausible. McLynn stresses that Marcus Aurelius had no illusions about those individuals who tried to placate him – Fronto, Aelius Aristides and Herodes Atticus being good examples. However, Marcus Aurelius also emphasised family and human warmth and may have applied different criteria to family relationships. However, this does not have to suggest that Marcus Aurelius was unaware of, for instance, Commodus' weaknesses.

According to Reydam-Schils (2005:9) a Stoic, like Marcus Aurelius, explored all things socio-cultural and economic, as dictated by his philosophy, which negates the idea that Marcus Aurelius may have been naïve about his relationships, as he would have analysed his relationships in detail. Reydam-Schils (2005:13) also suggests that Stoics propagate a very strong sense of self, constantly weighing the current ethos against the philosophical ideal. The Stoics' obligation to the community entails

focus on political responsibility as a whole. According to Reydam-Schils (2005:13) a Stoic, such as Marcus Aurelius, had no choice but to be involved in the normal relationships of friendship, father, son and husband. Marriage was especially seen as a partnership which encourages a collective “pursuit of the philosophical life” Reydam-Schils (2005:13).

Reydam-Schils (2005:37) maintains that in this process of exploring all things, the Stoic self stays relational rather than detaching itself, as in the Platonic sense. Reydam-Schils (2005:37) points to Gill’s (1996:10) terminology that argues that the Stoic is an “objective-participant”, in other words someone who is able to stay completely impartial, while still connecting themselves through relationships. Be that as it may, Marcus Aurelius, according to Reydam-Schils (2005:69) recognises that relationships are unpredictable, as is fundamental in Stoicism and can potentially hinder the practice of virtue. Marcus therefore recognises that relationships can be imperfect and recognises the need to work on them.

The evidence of Marcus Aurelius’ relationships suggests that the effort of the work they needed may have eventually driven him to withdraw. This is in alignment with Rutherford’s (1989:121) argument who says about Marcus Aurelius, that apart from Book I, the *Meditations* paints a picture of a lonely man, with very little contact with others on a personal level. Reydam-Schils (2005:4) however presents a statement that casts a very different light onto Rutherford’s argument, namely that “a Stoic turns inward for the sake of reaching out to others.” This suggests that Marcus Aurelius’ loneliness could have been a deliberate action, since Reydam-Schils suggests that turning inwards and almost isolating himself, could have been an attempt by Marcus Aurelius to reach out to others, but possibly resulted in him becoming even lonelier. Can one then determine that Marcus Aurelius was indeed lonely, or was the loneliness a direct result of his Stoicism? The evidence leads me to conclude that it was probably a combination of both, especially if one contrasts, as does Rutherford (1989:121) his correspondence with Fronto in Marcus Aurelius’ younger life with that of his own words in *Meditations* in his later life. Rutherford believes that he drifted further and further away from the members of his court in his later years. Although they continued to praise him, Marcus Aurelius believed that they in fact disliked him. In *Meditations* x.36 there is a suggestion of this:

will there not be somebody at the end who will be saying in his heart ‘We can breathe again, at last, free of this schoolmaster ... I felt all along that he was tacitly condemning us’.  
*Meditations* x.36.

Rutherford states that many passages in *Meditations* indicate that Marcus Aurelius was very conscious of his Emperorship and this thought pushed him to be separated from those he ruled.

Rutherford's observation is simply one perspective that may be taken into account in order to demonstrate possible reasons for some of Marcus Aurelius' actions.

This brings to an end the discussion of issues around Marcus Aurelius' actions with regards to his four most controversial relationships, namely in his role as son, father, husband and brother. The next section explores Marcus Aurelius' conformism when it came to slavery and the persecution of Christians.

### 4.3 Marcus Aurelius and Slavery

Much of this section focuses on the manumission of slaves and the administration around ensuring that citizens or free men were not mistaken as slaves from an administrative perspective.

Subsequently, it is not unexpected that the proof of Marcus Aurelius' actions towards slavery sits squarely within legislation. Grant (1996:40) points out that Roman emperors had always been occupied in the actual practical tasks of legislation, but Marcus Aurelius pushed legislation to another level as is evident from the no less than two hundred pieces of legislation that have survived from his rule.

Brunt (1998:139) argues that Marcus Aurelius believed that he had "duties to all men, since all like himself share in the divine reason and are his kinsmen." Brunt (1998:139) infers from this, that justice must then also have been extended to slaves and Brunt refers to *Meditations* v.3.1.1 where Marcus Aurelius writes about his obligations to his own slaves. Grant (1996:41) however argues that although this duty to humanity is seen as a Stoic creed, it would be an overstatement to say that Stoicism dominated throughout Marcus Aurelius' laws and that it is more apt to suggest that Stoicism only had a broad influence over his humanitarian legislation. Here it is not about Stoicism and legislation as such, but rather about the humanitarian element when it came to judgements made. I feel it would have been impossible for Marcus Aurelius to separate humanitarianism out of his legal judgements completely.

It is important to note upfront that Marcus Aurelius did not abolish slavery or even truly increase the protection of slaves (see Brunt 1998:141), but rather concentrated on the notion of justice around the matter of slavery. This section therefore concentrates on reflecting the laws that might have indirectly influenced slavery or freedom during this time, rather than incidents that demonstrate Marcus Aurelius' specific actions towards slaves. In demonstrating this, it is also important to look at some aspects of Marcus Aurelius' administration of the courts, which gives a specific perspective on his character as ruler.

Birley (1987:133) argues that within the context of Marcus Aurelius and slavery, there are three main areas of interest. Firstly there is an increased focus on administration, specifically within the local communities; secondly there is the manumission or emancipation of slaves, and thirdly the issue of the protection of orphans and minors.

Birley (1987:135) further points out that it is important to note that Marcus Aurelius preferred to uphold the old ways and laws. With reference to this McLynn (2009:188), for example, also points out that Marcus Aurelius was strict around the matter of citizen versus non-citizen and class distinctions. McLynn argues that Marcus Aurelius did not only sustain class distinction in the form of severe socio-economic differences, but also visibly, through the differential clothing worn by different members of society and the differences in nomenclature, for example: *clarissimus* for senators and *egregius* for knights. McLynn (2009:188) argues that he was against the integration of traditional roles; for instance he insisted on keeping senators as commanders. Senators were also forbidden to marry women with criminal records and freedmen were not allowed to marry ladies of senatorial rank (see Epictetus, *Discourses*, iii.24.88-89). In keeping with these laws McLynn believes that Marcus Aurelius' legal judgments not only upheld the old laws, but also had a clear tendency to favour the upper classes (see *Meditations* viii.49) and this was seen even more in the Asian provinces than in Italy or Greece. For instance, Marcus Aurelius would not receive embassies from all the provinces on the same basis. They were provided with requested favours based on whether he thought they were worthy of it – citizenship, immunity or exemption from taxation (see *Meditations* x.35). It may be argued that this was another instance of astute political play by Marcus Aurelius, where he was careful to keep the upper classes from Rome appeased, through this distinction.

According to Grant (1996:41) under Marcus Aurelius we find the first example of the methodical use of administrative law, which made the government even more authoritarian. Marcus Aurelius not only acted as legislator, but also as judge. Although meticulous, Marcus Aurelius was also indulgent in his judicial tasks. An example of this was Marcus Aurelius' non-punishment of Avidius Cassius' accomplices after the revolt in the east (discussed in section 4.2.4).

It is also important to note that according to Birley (1987:135) Marcus Aurelius often made use of prefects and lawyers through whose authority laws were drawn up. So, Marcus Aurelius did not institute and administer all the laws himself, but organised his administration to assist with the legal process. In addition to laws, Marcus Aurelius also made many judicial reforms in order to assist with the workload of the courts and the administration around slaves.

These included, firstly, an order to officials to assist in finding escaped slaves and also punishment for those harbouring such slaves (Brunt 1998:142). Secondly, according to Birley (1987:134-135) Marcus Aurelius gave the praetorian and consular ranks the power to resolve disputes and the Senate to hear appeals, thereby showing immense and unequalled respect to the Senate. Birley (1987:135) argues that this resulted in an orderly government, whereas the opposite would have been true, had Marcus Aurelius relied on military rule alone. It also meant that Marcus Aurelius was often not involved in the settling of disputes – an important point to consider for the purposes of this study, as it meant that some judgements would then naturally not have been his own doing.

Thirdly, according to Birley (1987:134), Marcus Aurelius increased the number of court days to two hundred and thirty a year, thereby assisting in clearing back-logs and preventing long incarceration prior to sentencing. Fourth and finally, as stated by Grant (1996:41) Marcus Aurelius re-instated four travelling judges in Italy. The purpose of this was to reduce costs and expedite justice. As can be seen, these judicial reforms did much to improve the system and also meant that some judicial matters were decentralised, in the sense that one man, the emperor, was not required to handle all, but could delegate responsibility to others.

I found three specific points of legislation that deals with slavery that are particularly relevant for the objectives of this study. The first deals with the manumission of slaves: Brunt (1998:143-144) argues that setting slaves free was common and this manumission was often used to incentivise skilled slaves who could work efficiently without supervision. Such slaves could purchase their freedom through earnings. If an owner promised freedom, such a promise had to be kept, in order to sustain the motivation of the other slaves. Under the instruction of a will, heirs could be bound to free slaves. Slaves could also belong to a corporation, the Roman government and municipalities, who had the right to set slaves free. Brunt (1998:144) states: “It was only logical for Marcus to extend this law to legally constituted *collegia*”, which meant that *collegia* also had the right to emancipate slaves.

Secondly, as Brunt (1998:143) points out, Marcus Aurelius also prohibited the gifting, or inheritance of freedom through force. Often owners were forced by the public to free a slave at public shows, in cases where the slave was judged to be a good performer. However, if an owner decided to free a slave of his own free will, there were few restrictions, the most notable being a restriction on the number of slaves that could be freed in this way. Thirdly, as Brunt (1998:143) mentions owners were not permitted to free slaves during their lifetime or in a will, if the intention was to defraud their creditors, knowing that they were already insolvent or that the freeing of the slaves could promote insolvency.

According to Birley (1987:136) inheritance cases were plentiful, more so because the imperial treasury (*fiscus*) had a vested interest in the form of death duties. Normally, the property of the deceased who died intestate went to the treasury. The difficulty came when it was not clear whether someone had died intestate or not. Brunt (1998:144) argues that Marcus Aurelius, like many of his predecessors, often decided cases of freedom *in favore libertatis*. This meant that they were lenient towards freedom and Birley (1987:138) believes that Marcus Aurelius was especially partial to freedom (see *Digest* xliii 18.1.27; xliii.19.33), which the evidence leads me to conclude shows him lenient towards the defendants. Since most defendants were slaves, it suggests a partiality to judgements for the lower classes. But that is in contradiction to McLynn's (2009:188) argument quoted above, who argues that Marcus Aurelius often favours the upper classes or land owners in judgements. Brunt (1998:140), like McLynn, argues that Marcus Aurelius followed the Stoic belief that equality is proportionate and that every man has his own station in life and has to be happy with whatever happens to him (see *Meditations* iv.10).

Furthermore Brunt (1998:140) refers to the *Digest*, where some of Marcus Aurelius' judgements saw him following the Roman practice of punishing people of lower classes more severely for the same offences as those committed by aristocrats. Grant (1996:39–40) argues along the same lines that during his reign Marcus Aurelius improved the lives of the richer population, by expelling freedmen (ex-slaves) from the council of Athens and restricting membership of the Areopagus. As this section has shown, he took measures that increased the rights and status of senators. He also assisted individual senators, by allowing them to minimise their required investment in Italian land, from one-third, as declared by Trajan to that of one-quarter. Marcus Aurelius also chose to consult a *consilium* or inner circle of personal allies instead of the Senate, which was not unusual in ancient times, however, most of the members were senators (Grant 1996:40).

In the incident with the shepherds and their sheep, during Marcus Aurelius' younger years (described in section 4.2.1 of this study), one finds more proof of Marcus Aurelius' tendency towards the Roman ethos with regards to class distinctions. MacMullen (1974:2-4) holds this incident as example of the divide between classes in 143 CE. For Marcus Aurelius, astride his horse it was an amusing incident, whereas for the shepherds it was less amusing. They were poor and the sheep did not belong to them. They were probably guarding a landlord's sheep or they were slaves, who possibly lived nearby, in the city.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> MacMullen (1974:5) maintains that landlords were often absent and because of their wealth were socially and administratively removed from servants, through bailiffs, overseers and lessees.

This incident certainly casts a shadow over arguments that Marcus Aurelius was lenient towards the lower classes and it still does not explain why many cases were judged *in favore libertatis*. An example of an unexpected leniency towards slaves are found in a discussion by Brunt (1998:142) where he refers to the issue of slave owners who were scared of assassination by one of their slaves. Republican law had stated that, if an owner or any of his immediate family is murdered, all slaves, even those that had been freed, must be questioned under torture and then executed, whether guilty or not. Even slaves who had simply overheard something, would have been executed for murder. Brunt (1998:142) refers to the *Digest* which states that this was justified through the reasoning that a slaves' duty included the protection of his owners. Therefore if the owner is murdered, the slave failed in his duty and is therefore liable for the murder.

However, according to Brunt (1998:142) Marcus Aurelius approved a modification to this law that granted immunity to slaves where the master has absolved the slaves on his deathbed from murder. This law does demonstrate some favour for the lower classes. Another example of this is referred to by Birley (1987:138) who describes a case where freedom for imprisoned slaves given by their master was deemed inadmissible, due to the slaves being imprisoned (see CJ vi.27.2; *Inst.* iii.11.1; *Digest* xxx.5.37; iv.2.13). Marcus Aurelius, however, adjudicated that if their sentence had been completed, the slaves could qualify for manumission.

Yet another example is found in Brunt (1998:145) who cites the case of wills and slaves included in estates. Here an estate had gone to the *fiscus*, since the departed had nullified the will by erasing the names of all the heirs. Marcus Aurelius judged that the heirs should remain and that a slave whose name had been deleted should be freed.

Having considered these contradictory arguments, I don't believe that judgements taken *in favore libertatis* and judgements pro-upper classes were a contradiction in Marcus Aurelius' eyes. The fact that he was partial to freedom and often was lenient towards defendants, probably was not seen by him as in conflict with his stance on class distinction. In general, this leads me to suggest that he saw these as two different issues and ultimately moral justice was the thing that Marcus Aurelius desired most. It is also notable that it was only in cases of freedom, where Marcus Aurelius seemed to favour lower classes and slave defendants.

This line of reasoning is supported by an argument by Brunt (1998:145-146) who judges that Marcus Aurelius' most innovative ruling in favour of freedom is to be found in an official announcement

addressed to Popilius Rufus, quoted precisely in Justinian's *Institutes*<sup>44</sup>. Brunt (1998:145-146) argues that in this matter Marcus Aurelius' ruling is inspired by *favor libertatis*, but on the other hand it also satisfies the testator's wishes and protects the interests of the creditor, which according to Brunt is a good illustration of how emperors made judicial decisions. I think that this point is quite important as it shows the crux of Marcus Aurelius' intentions, which I have found to embody both *favor libertatis* as well as favouritism to the upper classes (see *Inst.* iii.11 pr.-6. "Marcus said that he was preferring the 'causa libertatis' to fiscal gains, but in the circumstances they would probably have been at best small.")

Further, Brunt (1998:147) argues that one must not understand from this that it was easy for slaves to contest their rights. Many did not contest their claims out of fear, ignorance of the law, or due to the status of their owners. If they did not succeed in their appeal, they were held answerable by Marcus Aurelius' enactment of retributive servitude. Brunt (1998:147) also argues that a slave struggled to prove freedom in cases of dispute, even though manumission was within their rights, and points out that legally, there could be no court proceeding between an owner and his slave. A slave had to be presented by an *adsertor libertatis*. If the slave was still serving, the onus was on him to prove his freedom; if he was liberated, the person claiming ownership had to prove it. Under Trajan, slaves could apply to the *praetor*, if they had not been freed upon manumission.

Brunt (1998:147) points out that Marcus Aurelius extended this power to provincial governors, which granted them similar power to that of the *praetor* at Rome, something which serves as a strong indication that governors could have judged against slaves without the knowledge of the emperor or other superiors. Another interesting development was that Marcus Aurelius permitted a slave to accuse an owner for hiding a will which gave him freedom. Brunt (1998:147) however, argues that jurists treated this as an exception to the rule, which stated that slaves were not permitted to charge or appear against their owners in court. Along the same lines Brunt (1998:142) argues that the slavery laws during this period were very savage and only occasionally softened. He quotes the *Digest* that states that in the case of slaves questioned during torture, Augustus and Hadrian sometimes imposed certain restrictions and Marcus Aurelius did the same; but there were

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<sup>44</sup> Brunt (1998:145) argues: "Under a will slaves were to be freed directly and by *fideicommissum*, but no testamentary or intestate heir would claim the estate, as it could have been presumed insolvent. The *fiscus* was then allowed to claim the estate, but could also refuse it and hand it over to the creditors who would then also sell the slaves. Brunt states that if the *fiscus* were itself a creditor, it would get its share. Marcus Aurelius, however, decided to award the estate to Popilius, if he gave security to the creditors for payment in full, in order that he might carry out the testator's intention of freeing the slaves. Marcus Aurelius' constitution was construed to mean that one or more of the slaves named might take the estate, freeing themselves and the other slaves concerned on condition of giving security to the creditors. The only security in such cases could have been the estate itself, but the creditors might calculate that new management might give them a better dividend than immediate sale of the assets".



also rulings by Marcus Aurelius where the questionings were repeated. Still, it is worth considering also Birley's (1987:138) argument that slaves found themselves in a continually improving position during the second century CE.

Having considered all the contradictory arguments, one has to question whether Marcus Aurelius had any positive effect on the circumstances of slaves and this is debatable. What cannot be denied is that Marcus Aurelius was extremely diligent in his pursuit of justice. Birley (1987:139) says that Marcus Aurelius showed

a painstaking thoroughness and attention to detail; an over careful insistence on elaborating obvious or trivial points; purism in the use of both the Greek and Latin languages; an earnestness which produces an attitude to the pretensions of the Greeks far more serious-minded than Antoninus Pius.

Birley (1987:139) argues that this is to be expected due to the fact that Marcus had spent a substantial time in training as emperor. In addition, I would like to argue that Marcus Aurelius' attitude and modus operandi flowed directly from his philosophic approach. His philosophical demeanour meant that, for him, duty would always come first.

This is important if we put in context the fact that Marcus Aurelius' reign, according to Goodman (1997:74) was extremely troubled. The extent of these troubles are also important within the context of slavery and the persecution of Christians (see section 4.4). Goodman points out that in total Marcus Aurelius spent 11 years in battle: against the Marcomanni and Quadi (170-171 CE); against the Sarmatian Lazyges (175 CE); and against Pannonia (177 CE). In between these campaigns he also had to deal with the revolt of Avidius Cassius in 175 CE. According to Hadot (1998:3) furthermore, the Empire was ravaged by a number of natural disasters: the flooding of the Tiber (161 CE), earthquakes in Cyzicus (161 CE) and Smyrna (178 CE) and the outbreak of the plague, which was brought back by Lucius Verus' troops upon their return from the Parthian war (166 CE).

The way in which he dealt, on top of this, with personal issues and socio-political issues as well as with judicial challenges serves to emphasise Marcus Aurelius' work ethic and dedication. Keeping this milieu in mind, the study will now look at Marcus Aurelius' actions around the persecution of Christians.

#### **4.4 Marcus Aurelius and the persecution of Christians**

This section concentrates on Marcus Aurelius' attitude toward and awareness of the Christians, the apparent increase of Christian martyrs during the period, as well as the curious incidents around the supposed miracles of the "Thundering legion" and "The rain miracle". All of these serve to attempt

to determine the extent of Christian persecution during Marcus Aurelius' rule and whether he was aware of and supported the persecutions in any way.

At first glance, scholarship seems divided around whether history truly proves that Christians were persecuted by the Romans during the second century CE. Keresztes (1968:321) is one of a very few scholars who argue that Christians in general endured relative peace under Antoninus Pius, but that under Marcus Aurelius the era became surprisingly violent and many anti-Christian acts occurred. Keresztes (1968:321) argues that persecutions under Marcus Aurelius have even surpassed the persecution that Christians endured during the first and early second centuries. Keresztes (1968:321) quotes a large number of scholarly arguments stating that Marcus Aurelius consciously issued anti-Christian laws and sanctioned persecutions under his rule.

Keresztes (1968:321) does however, point out that that there exists no clear view of what happened to Christians under Marcus Aurelius. What is clear is that some later writers have incorrectly differentiated between the actions of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius towards events of popular violence against Christians and the actions of some provincial officials of the time. This might have occurred due to the historians not recognising how influential and powerful these provincial officials were in terms of governmental and judicial decisions. Keresztes (1968:322) believes that Eusebius' approach to the period in general as well as his mention of a number of individual cases under the reign of Marcus Aurelius, seem to have been taken as the best guide of the real character of the persecutions during this period.

What is notable is that Keresztes (1968:321) concedes that ancient Christian writers, such as Justin, Melito and Athenagoras, refute any charges against Marcus Aurelius as persecutor, to such a degree that Tertullian acknowledged him to be a protector of Christians and also, that despite the ancient writers' presumed rhetorical tendencies, they might have had a more realistic view of the events than modern-day scholars. Nevertheless, this lack of clarity with regards to the events, as Keresztes (1968:321) argues, is the one disappointing feature of modern-day commentary on the Christian problem of the era.

These findings present a conundrum, in that it leaves one with seemingly little evidence to undoubtedly support outright Christian persecution under Marcus Aurelius. What is clear, is that there undoubtedly occurred a number of incidents pertaining to the persecution of Christians. Whether Marcus Aurelius was consciously aware of these incidents and whether he approved of the manner in which they were handled, is hard to speculate on. Based on and in concurrence with Keresztes' argument, I then think that due to such divergence one needs to reinvestigate the available information in order to create a more nuanced picture of what may have happened.

Testimonies of persecution exist and I would like to suggest they provide grounds for Keresztes' argument that Christian persecution was most probably a reality during the reign of Marcus Aurelius.

In the following, the study will provide a cursory overview of the views of the Christian Apologists during Marcus Aurelius' reign; thereafter thought will be given to specific incidents, such as the events around the martyrs of Lugdunum (Lyon) and finally the study will focus on the Roman belief in miracles, through highlighting the anecdote of the Thundering Legion and the Rain miracle. Although none of these are outright proof of specific persecution of Christians by Marcus Aurelius, it does confirm his awareness of certain incidents and demonstrates some of his actions with regards to these incidents.

Grant (1996:43) tells us that Christianity gained ground during Marcus Aurelius' rule. He suggests that although at this stage Christianity was mainly admired for its social services towards others, it had caught the attention of some of the leading minds of the period and could no longer be considered only a religion for the uneducated classes. As the first proof point, Grant argues that some of the most important Christian Apologists and Martyrs came forward during this period. Keresztes (1968:333), like Grant, points to the year 177 CE as especially important and as an unusually active year in apologetic activity (see also McLynn 2009:296). Keresztes (1968:327) argues that if one had to judge from Eusebius' concerns around the seventeenth year of Marcus Aurelius' reign and the unusual activity of all the individual martyrdoms, one can discern two individual waves of persecution during Marcus Aurelius' term.

Keresztes (1968:325), like Grant later, argues that most of the Christian martyrdoms mentioned by Eusebius, with the possible exception of Publius, can be attributed to this period, but the precise dating of these is extremely difficult. Nevertheless, scholars seemingly attribute the following Christian martyrdoms to the reign of Marcus Aurelius: Keresztes (1968:321-325) quoting Eusebius *EH* iv.16.1, associates Justin's literary activities with the eighth year of Marcus Aurelius' reign and confirms his martyrdom under the city prefect Junius Rusticus; Grant (1996:45) identifies the execution of the martyr Polycarp in Smyrna around 177 CE and also refers to Carpus, Papyrus and Agathonice who died after being tortured by the pro-consul of Asia; Keresztes (1968:327) refers to the martyrdom of Pionius between 162 CE and 163 CE or 167 CE and 168 CE and the martyrdom of the Bishop Thrax around the same time as Polycarp.

McLynn (2009:296) refers in addition to a number of addresses made to Marcus Aurelius, by famous Christian figures, including bishop Apollinaris of Hierapolis (see also Eusebius *EH* iv.26.1), Melito, the

Bishop of Sardis and Athenagoras. Finally, Keresztes (1968:327) refers to the massacre at Lugdunum in the seventeenth year of Marcus Aurelius' rule as testimony of the persecutions of the time.

It seems clear that there was substantial activity with regards to martyrs and apologists during Marcus Aurelius' reign. McLynn (2009:296-297) argues that the aim of the apologists was to be safeguarded by the emperor, which they then intended to utilise to widen their reach, in an attempt to convince even more people of the merits of Christianity. Grant (1996:46) argues that the Christian apologetic works did lead to the strengthening of Christianity, attaining exactly the opposite result of what Marcus Aurelius' administration had probably wanted. But, it also brought Christianity to the attention of the powers that be, showing it to be in opposition to Roman beliefs in imperial cults.

Scholars agree that Justin is probably the most prominent example of a Christian martyr during Marcus Aurelius' reign. According to Birley (1987:111) Justin's first *Apology*, written in 154 CE, was addressed to Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus. It is not known whether any of the three knew of it, or read it. It is important to note that according to Keresztes (1968:334) neither Justin's *First Apology* nor *Second Apology* (early 160 CE) refers to an extraordinary persecution of Christians. This again highlights the probability that Christian persecution during this period might not have been widespread.

Grant (1996:45) points out that Justin together with six of his disciples were executed by Rusticus and Birley (1987:152) refers to three verbatim versions of Justin's trial which survived<sup>45</sup>. Birley (1987:154) argues that Rusticus demonstrated intellectual curiosity during the trial, but his decision was quick, showing no real emotional struggle. This is notable, as it reveals Rusticus' ethics. He

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<sup>45</sup> Birley (1987:153) quotes an account of the history: "After they were led in, the prefect said to Justin: 'What kind of life do you lead?' 'Blameless and uncondemned by all men', said Justin. 'What doctrines do you practise?' said Rusticus the prefect. 'I have tried to learn all doctrines' said Justin, 'but I have committed myself to the true doctrines of the Christians, even if they do not please those with false beliefs.' 'Those then are the doctrines that please you?' said Rusticus the prefect. 'Yes, since I follow them with belief.' 'What sort of belief?' 'Our worship of the God of the Christians, who alone we think was the maker of all the universe from the beginning, and the Son of God Jesus Christ, who was also foretold by the prophets that he would come down to mankind as a herald of salvation and a teacher of good knowledge. But I think my words are insignificant in comparison with his divinity, acknowledging the power of prophecy, in that it was proclaimed about him who I said just now is Son of God. For you know that in the past the prophets foretold his presence among men.' 'Where do you meet?' said the prefect Rusticus. 'Wherever each prefers or is able. Besides, do you think we can all meet in the same place?' said Justin. 'Tell me where you meet – or in what place?' 'I have been living above the Baths of Myrtinus during all this time that I have been staying in Rome (and this is my second stay). I know no other meeting-place but there; and if anyone wanted to come to me I shared the words of truth with him', said Justin. 'So you are a Christian?' said Rusticus. 'Yes, I am a Christian,' Justin replied.'" According to Birley (1987:154), Rusticus then questioned five other accomplices, one woman, Charito, and four men, Euelpistus, Hierax, Paeon and Liberianus. The trial ended with more questions for Justin: "If you are scourged and beheaded, do you believe that you will ascend to heaven?" 'I hope for it if I am steadfast in my perseverance. But I know that for those who live in the right way there awaits the divine gift even to the consummation'. Said Justin. 'So you guess this, that you will ascend,' said Rusticus. 'I do not guess, I am completely convinced.' said Justin. 'If you do not obey, you will be punished,' said the prefect Rusticus. 'We are confident that if we are punished we shall be saved,' said Justin. The prefect Rusticus pronounced: 'those unwilling to sacrifice to the gods, after being scourged are to be executed in accordance of the laws'." (See Eusebius HE iv.16.1)

clearly viewed the trial analytically, which possibly also demonstrates the general Roman view of the time, namely that there was nothing wrong with such persecutions and that they were a matter for judicial deliberations. Interestingly, Birley (1987:154) points out that Christians, if accused could revoke their testimony, in which case they would receive a free pardon. This was the only crime to which this condition applied and as the evidence suggests, it possibly supports a considerably fairer attitude towards Christians, than often assumed by later Christians.

If one refers back to the possibility of Marcus Aurelius being unaware of most, if not all of the injustices to Christians during his rule, one has to consider Birley's (1987:154) argument that Marcus Aurelius must have been aware of at least Justin's trial as he states in *Meditations* xi.3:

how wonderful is that soul which is ready, if it must be at this very moment released from the body, either to be extinguished, or to be scattered, or to survive. This readiness must come from a specific decision, and not out of sheer obstinacy like the Christians.

This is then also the only reference to Christianity within the *Meditations* and Birley (1987:154) argues that Justin's trial could possibly have given Marcus Aurelius the impetus to make this statement.

Another possible indication of Marcus Aurelius' knowledge of the plight of the Christians can be found in Athenagoras' address, which McLynn (2009:296) argues was delivered to the Emperor, in person, through a speech. In addition this was seemingly the final *Apology* presented to an emperor. McLynn (2009:296-297) refers to Eusebius *EH* iv.3, who points out that Athenagoras argued the superiority of Christianity as a form of worship, as opposed to paganism. Athenagoras pointed out that monotheism was a much more logical approach to religion than Olympian polytheism and he defended Christianity against supposed Roman and Jewish malice.

Probably the most well documented example of the Christian opposition to the Roman belief in imperial cults during Marcus Aurelius' rule took place, as Keresztes (1968:329) suggests, during the years 161-168 CE. An Imperial edict ordering worship and sacrifices to the gods throughout the Empire was dictated by Marcus Aurelius. The character thereof and the exact date is in question<sup>46</sup>,

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<sup>46</sup> Eusebius *EH* ii.5-6 states: "But in order that we may give an account of these laws from their origin, it was an ancient decree that no one should be consecrated a God by the Emperor until the Senate had expressed its approval. Marcus Aurelius did thus concerning a certain idol, Alburnus. And this is a point in favour of our doctrine, that among you divine dignity is conferred by human decree. If a God does not please a man he is not made a God. Thus, according to this custom, it is necessary for man to be gracious to God. Tiberius, therefore, under whom the name of Christ made its entry into the world, when this doctrine was reported to him from Palestine, where it first began, communicated with the Senate, making it clear to them that he was pleased with the doctrine. But the Senate, since it had not itself proved the matter, rejected it. But Tiberius continued to hold his own opinion, and threatened death to the accusers of the Christians."

but Keresztes (1968:328) argues that, although this cannot be verified, there are indications that the edict was issued against Christians. Keresztes (1968:328) quotes *Orosius* vii.15.4 who recounts a similar law by Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus, which he associates with the fear of the plague, which started at the end of the Parthian war.

Keresztes (1968:330) argues that during the Republic in such troubled circumstances, the Romans would have looked towards advice from the Sibylline books. The authorities would order that amends needed to be made through ceremonies and the introduction of foreign gods. Keresztes believes that Marcus Aurelius would have followed a similar course of action.

As far as this edict is concerned, McLynn (2009:296) mentions that Melito queried Marcus Aurelius around whether the edict was truly his wish (see Eusebius HE xxvi.1-10; 5-6, 7-9; Jerome *Chronicle* (ed. Helm), p.206). McLynn argues that Melito's question is based on the fact that previous emperors, such as Hadrian and Antoninus Pius, had shown more lenience with regards to such edicts. This argument of McLynn's causes one to doubt Marcus Aurelius' true motives in this regard and this leads me to believe that there was some sort of political pressure felt by the philosopher-emperor.

Grant (1996:46) argues that the Christians were thrown into the spotlight when they refused to participate in the imperial cults during trying times such as the plague and other natural disasters. I consider this one of the most plausible reasons for the supposed increase in Christian persecutions during this time. As stated in section 4.3, the empire during Marcus Aurelius' rule endured a great amount of natural disasters. With the level of superstition that ordinary people showed during these times, it was natural for pagans to blame Christians for invoking the plague, because of their non-participation in the imperial cults and for Christians to blame pagans for invoking the plague due to their persecution of the Christians for non-participation in the imperial cults.

As a direct reference to this law and as an example of one of the clearest incidents of persecution during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, Keresztes (1968:322) refers to the events at Lugdunum (Lyon), as described in a letter from the churches in Vienna and Lugdunum to the churches in Asia and Phrygia, which again corresponds with Marcus Aurelius' seventeenth year of reign (see Eusebius *EH* i.1-3):

The Number of those who fought for Religion in Gaul under Verus and the nature of the Conflicts. 1. The country in which the arena was prepared for them was Gaul, of which Lyons and Vienne are the principal and most celebrated cities. The Rhone passes through both of them, flowing in a broad stem through the entire region. 2. The most celebrated

churches in that country sent an account of the witnesses to the churches in Asia and Phrygia, relating in the following manner what was done amongst them. I will give their own words. 3. 'The servants of Christ residing at Vienne and Lyons, in Gaul, to the brethren throughout Asia and Phrygia, who hold the same faith and hope of redemption, peace and grace and glory from God the father and Christ Jesus our Lord'.

Keresztes maintains that Eusebius *EH* quotes widely from this letter, proving that he had read the entire letter. Keresztes (1968:325) states that besides Eusebius' accounts we also have some of the Acts of Martyrs as source for this incident. Apparently persecutions in this year were ever increasing in the form of more violent attacks on Christians by people in the cities. Farquharson (1968:267) maintains that it is not possible to deny that the Christian communities at Lugdunum were subject to an outbreak of fanaticism and rebellion. According to Grant (1996:46) in 160 CE the cult of Cybele was proclaimed official in Gaul. Prior to the event the public had already made angry suggestions to the Christians, who as oriental immigrants did a brisk trade in the region. Their lifestyle was rumoured to be less than reputable and this caused them to be blamed for military, economic and natural disasters. Farquharson (1968:267) points out that the governor of the region referred the matter to Marcus Aurelius, who replied "that the law must take its course". Farquharson argues that this was inevitable, if one takes into consideration the general Roman attitude toward religious disobedience, but Grant (1995:45) argues that although not present at the actual event it is impossible to exempt Marcus Aurelius from responsibility for the deaths, as it was during imprisonment and tortures that some of the prisoners died<sup>47</sup>.

Grant (1996:45) argues that although one can't deny the personal bravery of these martyrs, one cannot presume that there lived a large Christian community in Gaul at the time. The few Christians were victimised by a mob distraught by their own troubles. Furthermore it was the middle of a hot summer, which further aggravated the crowds, who acted against the Christians before the authorities could control the situation. In total 48 Christians were executed (Grant 1996:45).

It is notable that the martyrs included people from many cultures in the Roman Empire (see Birley 1987:202). Therefore Birley believes that the persecutions could partly have been attributed to xenophobia and goes on to say that even the testimony of their pagan slaves were accepted against them.

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<sup>47</sup> Some prisoners who survived the first prosecution were later killed in the arena, by animals. Two of the prominent under the prosecuted were the very young bishop, Pothinus and Blandina, a slave. The dead were "publicly displayed, then burnt" and "thrown into the River Rhône" (Grant 1996:45).

The last major persecution, according to McLynn (2009:292), took place in July 180 CE, in Africa, where 12 Christians (the Scillitan martyrs) were prosecuted and beheaded by the proconsul. Indications of the incident, according to Grant (1996:46) is found in the Latin *Acts of the Execution of the Martyrs of Scillium* in Numidia.

McLynn (2009:294) argues that notably the Christians emphasised “that they never blamed the emperor personally for persecution; they saw this ultimately as the perversion of the Roman system by wicked demons” (McLynn cites Justin I *Apology* 57). McLynn (2009:294) also argues that the uncompromising attitude of the Christian martyrs made it difficult for their judges to be lenient and that on top of this they criticised the Romans severely for sacrificing to the Roman gods.

This is an important argument by McLynn as it can then appear as if the Christians drew an abnormal amount of attention to themselves during this period and because of their religious beliefs a gulf appeared between them and their fellow citizens, leaving the rulers with no choice but to judge against Christians in order to appease the Roman population. It is also apparent that Marcus Aurelius did not necessarily participate directly in the persecution of Christians, but the evidence seems to point in the direction that he must have been conscious of individual incidents.

Another point of interest is to remember that, as Grant (1996:42) points out, during this period, a belief in miracles was prominent in paganism. As an example of this, Grant discusses Marcus Aurelius’ proclamation *RELIG(io) AVG(usti)* on his coinage in 172-173 CE. However, this coin and the *religio* it depicted were different to the norm, since the inscription also showed the temple of Mercury, in the Egyptian style of Thoth, rather than in the Roman style. Grant (1996:42) maintains that it refers, as does a scene on the Column of Aurelius to the Lightning miracle, also known as the miracle of the Thundering Legion and to the rain miracle, two incidents, which both presumably took place in 172 CE and are represented on the Column of Aurelius in Rome. Grant (1996:42) relates the story of the two miracles as documented by Dio *RH* lxxii.8.2-4:

When the Romans were in peril in the course of the battle, the divine power saved them in a most unexpected manner. The Quadi had surrounded them at a spot favourable for their purpose and the Romans were fighting valiantly with their shields locked together. Then the barbarians ceased fighting, expecting to capture them easily as the result of the heat and their thirst. So they posted guards all about and hemmed them in to prevent their getting water anywhere; for the barbarians were far superior in numbers. The Romans, accordingly were in a terrible plight from fatigue, wounds, the heat of the sun, and thirst, and so could neither fight nor retreat, but were standing in the line and at their several posts, scorched by the heat, when suddenly many clouds gathered and a mighty rain, not without divine



interposition, burst upon them. Indeed, there is a story to the effect that Harnouphis, an Egyptian magician, who was a companion of Marcus Aurelius, had invoked by means of enchantments various deities and in particular Mercury, the god of air, and by this means attracted the rain ... *Dio RH* goes on to say that when the rain poured down, at first all turned their faces upwards and received the water in their mouths. Then some held out their shields and some their helmets to catch it, and they not only took deep draughts themselves but also gave their horses to drink ... a violent hail-storm and numerous thunderbolts fell upon the ranks of the foe ... but the fire did not touch the Romans.

Both these so-called miracles are only relevant for the purposes of this study, because they demonstrate the Roman psyche of the time. The incident provides a good example of the rhetoric used by historical writers such as Dio during this period and, as argued by Grant (1996:43), it also throws light on Marcus Aurelius and Roman religion of the time, namely the worship of multiple deities, such as Mercury and his Egyptian counterpart, Thoth, whom the Egyptian Harnouphis and Marcus Aurelius were credited with invoking. According to Grant (1996:43) further evidence of this can be found in a figure illustrated on the column of Marcus Aurelius, which is clearly the figure of a pagan god. Interestingly though, Grant (1996:48) suggests that Marcus Aurelius had not been present during the miracles.

But, according to Grant (1996:43) many cults tried to take credit for the miracles, including the Christians and while McLynn (2009:291) suggests that Marcus Aurelius supposedly praised the Christians for the miracle, Grant (1996:43) argues that Marcus Aurelius rejected the Christian claim, even though he publicly accepted that a miracle of divine intervention had taken place.

According to Birley (1987:171) later in history a Byzantine monk, Xiphilinus supplemented Dio's construction of events by claiming that the prayers of Christian soldiers of the Thundering Legion had brought the rain. If this is true, Birley argues, then it is clear that the Christians did not receive the credit at the time and that Marcus Aurelius had recognised only the pagan gods within this miracle; this would support Grant's argument. Birley (1987:173) also goes on to argue that a letter which was included in Justin's *Apology* claiming that Marcus Aurelius had summoned the thunder, was incorrect and forged.

This anecdote clearly demonstrates firstly the belief in miracles by the Romans and secondly the contradictions within Roman history and Christian history as to the events. In addition, it serves to illustrate Birley's statement and arguments (1987:258-261) quoted in the introduction of this study, around the unreliability of the information from the period. This concludes the section on the persecution of Christians.

#### 4.5 Some concluding remarks

In summary, within both the subjects of slavery and the persecution of Christians one witnesses Marcus Aurelius conforming to both Stoic ethics and Roman politics. As established, Marcus Aurelius rarely challenged the status quo and inevitably gravitated towards conformism, especially in his role as judge. This does not mean that he wasn't fair, but it does mean that he leant towards the conservative. This conservative outlook is embedded in the way a Roman Stoic, such as Marcus Aurelius would have thought about issues, as is illustrated, for example, in the argument by Reydam-Schils' (2005:8) that it could be true that Marcus Aurelius pursued the legitimacy of his power through portraying himself as a philosophical ruler.

Yet De Blois (2012:179) argues that although Marcus Aurelius was a very active ruler, he did not try to impose his philosophical life onto society. His military, financial and fiscal strategies and legal decisions were not embedded in philosophy. In law he showed himself to be an experienced judge of Roman law. De Blois (2012:180) concludes that Marcus Aurelius' philosophical inclinations did not influence practical politics but rather only influenced Marcus Aurelius' personal life.

I would like to conclude this chapter by asking whether one can truly agree that Marcus Aurelius used his philosopher-emperor cloak as disguise to a much more astute political agenda. The fact of the matter is that the evidence seem inconclusive and that many of the counter-arguments in this chapter seem speculative. One will never know the absolute truth, but the arguments are compelling and it does suggest that Marcus Aurelius could indeed simultaneously have been a serious philosophical thinker, as well as a very astute political strategist.

# CONCLUSION

At first glance one finds almost the perfect leader in Marcus Aurelius. One finds someone who is just, someone who is wise and very mild of nature, someone who is resilient. One does not find an Alexander who conquers the world, or an Augustus with his building programmes and forward thinking. But one also does not find the madness of an Alexander and egotistical demeanour of Augustus. One does find a man conflicted, someone who struggles with his own turmoil and who seems to emerge as a reluctant leader.

In conclusion I am led to reason that similar to any world leader, Marcus Aurelius often had to work with imperfect information and had to base his decisions and actions on probabilities. Due to the size of the Empire he often had to rely on information from others when taking action, for instance in the case of the Christians at Lugdunum, where he had to rely on information from the local governor and in the case of the Avidius Cassius rebellion, where he was not present, but had to rely on reports. I am therefore persuaded that due to the nature of his personality and his affinity to Stoicism, he truly aspired to act morally and just, while accepting that not everything was in his control and that in some instances he would have had to act contrary to his inner moral compass.

However, this does not mean that he abstained from any political play during the course of his reign. In fact I conclude that there was a very politically adept man hiding behind the Philosopher-Emperor demeanour. How else would he have succeeded in surviving such a lengthy rule?

While the study is not completely conclusive with regards to what the specific influences were with regards to specific actions by Marcus Aurelius, it seems fair to hypothesise that a blurring of the lines exists between Stoic philosophical ideas and traditional Roman ethics of the period, both of which influenced Marcus Aurelius' actions. Current research appears to support the view that Marcus Aurelius' actions were not only influenced by his philosophical views, but also by the traditional moral tenets of the period.

I am pushed towards reasoning that there existed some measure of a contradiction between Marcus Aurelius' Stoic principles and his own political goals. I would suggest that he had no other choice but to attempt to face these contradictions head-on, by devising his own method of coping and thereby surviving not only as politician, but also as a man.

If one returns to the principle of philosophy of action and the principle of practical ethics as discussed in Chapter one of the study, one has to firstly consider whether it can be stated that Marcus Aurelius mostly directed his actions towards a specific goal. In this I am confident that Marcus Aurelius was quite deliberate in the outcomes he desired, whether these were Stoic in nature or based on political survival. He weighed-up and deliberated on actions in minute detail. One sees this especially within his legal judgements.

I would also argue that Marcus Aurelius had very real intentions to attempt to practice that which he knew to be moral and ethical and I have to admire him for this. But it is undeniable that he, like presumably any leader, also struggled with the conflict often created between his real intentions and the outcome of his actions.

With regards to his familial relationships and friendships, the study has shown that Marcus Aurelius valued family and friendships and that these connections triumphed in his decisions around how he handled certain relationship issues. On the issue of slavery, I have to acknowledge that although there are strong arguments around the fact that Marcus Aurelius did not improve protection for slaves and that he certainly did not abolish slavery, Marcus Aurelius truly did attempt to remove barriers to slaves obtaining freedom. One sees this in his non-compromising demeanour when a slave had been promised freedom, but due to non-fulfilment by an heir or buyer, was denied this freedom. The fact that he did not abolish slavery, was purely due to the fact that slavery was not a recognised problem. In addition, one also sees from the study that although he clearly favoured the upper classes in many cases, his laws did help marginalised groups like widows and slaves. This again illustrates that Marcus Aurelius was deliberate in his actions and had a very real intention of acting morally and ethically, where he could.

On the issue of Christian persecution the evidence seems more muddled and again I would like to argue that although there is evidence of Christian persecution during Marcus Aurelius' rule, there seems no clear indication that he was directly involved. This then could be a prime example of Marcus Aurelius dealing with imperfect information.

Although some scholars argued that Marcus Aurelius may also be regarded as a failure as ruler due to him being overwhelmed by natural disasters and wars beyond his control, McLynn (2009:494) states "it is as a thinker that he transcends the ages and lives on as a true immortal" and Kaplan (2011:53) argues that a leader who can transport the social order to a higher level of development is not only a good leader, but also one who is truly needed – in that history is determined by free-willed individuals in addition to larger environmental and economic forces. Kaplan goes on to state that the good autocrat stands amidst those political issues that constantly mould societies.

I want to suggest that Marcus Aurelius succeeded. The man wished to live the life of a Philosopher, but the Emperor persisted, never rejecting his duty. This in my mind is excellently portrayed in the following poem of Mayhar (1970:5):

"Yours is a cynical face, my friend,  
Heavy-lidded, with inward-seeing eyes;  
You seem raddled and rent  
By labours and frustrations.  
You wrestled with an empire,  
With barbarians, with your soul:  
The empire stood, awhile;  
The barbarians calmed, in time;  
But your spirit, friend Marcus Aurelius, still struggles  
Behind your beleaguered eyes.

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